University of Alberta

Women's Circle Spirituality: A Narrative Inquiry

by

Janis Adele Shaw ©

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

in

Family Ecology and Practice

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...when a woman offers the truth about her struggle to wake up, to grow beyond old models of womanhood and old spiritualities that no longer sustain, when she expresses what it was really like to discover and relate to the Feminine Divine, to heal feminine wounds, to unearth courage, and to reclaim her power, then women's differences tend to give way to something more universal. Often in such stories we find a deep sameness beneath our dissimilarities. We find we are all women, and down deep we ache for what has been lost to us. We want to tell the truth about our lives, to see the truth through other women's lives. We want to trust a Feminine Source of wisdom We long for the whole, empowered woman who wants to be born in us.

When we start on this journey, we discover a couple of things right away. First, the way is largely uncharted, and second, we are all we've got. If women don't tell our stories and utter our truths in order to chart ways into sacred feminine experience, who will? It is stories women need. Stories give us hope, a little guidance, and a lot of bravery.

Sue Monk Kidd
(1996, pp. 2-3)

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Women's Circle Spirituality: A Narrative Inquiry submitted by Janis Adele Shaw in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Family Ecology and Practice.

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July 27, 1999

To Esther
who thoughtfully said
I think you can, too.

Abstract

Women's Circle Spirituality: A Narrative Inquiry is an impressionist's telling of the history of a research project featuring the spiritual life stories of four women drawn to Sophia's Circle, a manifestation of a burgeoning social phenomenon sometimes called the Western women's ritualizing movement. Initiated in the belief that stories are the closest we can come to experience and thereby to understanding personal and social history (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 155), the inquiry attempts to answer the qualitative researcher's elemental question: *What's going on here?* The *here* of the study is a triptych—the women and their stories, Sophia's Circle, and the woman-centred spirituality phenomenon. As well as the women's stories, the research account, an intertwining of the knower and the known, includes an introduction to narrative research, a literature review detailing the emergent women-centred spirituality movement and a participant-observer's description of a Candlemas celebration in Sophia's Circle.

Preface

The research account which follows tells the story of my narrative inquiry into the lives of four women who have been "called by the circle." I am one of the four.

The circle that brought us together may be thought of in, at least, two ways. First, it is Sophia's Circle, a series of workshops for women interested in female-focussed spirituality. Second, the circle is a metaphor for *ritualizing in the round,* women gathering in circles for spiritual exploration, study, and celebration. As scholar Leslie Northup (1997) writes: "Few images encapsulate the spirit of women's ritualizing as effectively as the circle, and few women's rituals are conducted in any other arrangement" (p. 29). All four of us have different experiences of *ritualizing in the round,* and we have all attended Sophia's Circle on at least one occasion. I like to think Sophia, Dorian, Shililyah and I practice a *women's circle spirituality.*

Acknowledgements

Thank you to:

Robyn for providing a safe space for me to speak of spiders and snakes.

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Jean for showing me to new ways to think about stories.

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Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah for entrusting me with your tellings.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In January of 1998, the year I turned 52, I became a Human Ecology graduate student. "Surely the department's oldest," my doctor said recently, laughing. I smiled in response and did not tell him I thought he was wrong, that instead of being the department's oldest student, I was, perhaps, its youngest. In a sense, you see, I was only 12 years old when I began my studies. I have two birth-days. I was born March 4, 1946; then born again, on the same day, 40 years later. I can claim to be entering either young-old age[1] or adolescence, depending on my mood and my audience. Most certainly, what I choose to say and how I choose to say it is affected by those who "hear me into speech."[2]

As I begin this thesis, the story of my narrative inquiry into the lives of women who practice a woman-centred spirituality, myself included, I am acutely aware of the audiences I address. One such audience is comprised of the three women who participated in my study: Sophia, spirit circle leader and visionary; Dorian, social worker and reader of tarot; and Shililyah, student and survivor. They trusted me to receive their spiritual life stories, now I offer them mine. A second audience is made up of three members of the academy, my committee members: Dr. Nanci Langford, historical sociologist and human ecologist; Dr. Jean Clandinin, mentor to teachers and narrative methodologist; Dr. Karen Hughes, sociologist, professor of

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[1] Some scholars might argue that I am rushing my entry into young-old age saying that the mean age for the young-old is 60 (Journal of the American Medical Association, 1974, Volume 271, #14, p. 1,093).

[2] "The phrase 'to hear into speech' was coined by Nelle Morton to express the sense that women gained the power to speak because other women were there to hear and affirm their words" (Christ, 1997, p. 184). I use the same phrase to suggest that an audience, regardless of gender, helps determine not only a woman's decision to speak, but also what she says as well as how she says it.

Women's Studies and researcher of women's work. They have been my teachers; I hope they see their lessons in my writing. I do not know the names of another audience—unknown individuals who will, perhaps, one day, take up my thesis, then settle in to read. I can only imagine who they may be and why they might be interested in my work.[3] Lastly, I identify myself as an audience, acknowledging that I write for me as well as for others, hoping to learn more about myself as an emergent thinking and feeling woman and scholar.

As I stand before my various audiences, wondering how best to help them understand my experiences, I consider the voice I will use to create my research texts. The voice I wish to project needs to be personally authentic, yet it also needs to signal social science (Lincoln, 1997, p. 51). Are these are conflicting needs? I certainly feel tension between them. I question, for example, my decision to privilege authenticity over scholarship in telling readers that I have been reborn. Do I risk alienating an academic audience by choosing words and style to represent the way in which I most often express myself in writing? If my only audience was the academy, I might have written that I experienced my fortieth birthday as an *epiphany,* using sociologist Norman Denzin's definition of "epiphanies as events in which individuals are so powerfully absorbed that they are left without an interpretative framework to make sense of their experience" (Ellis & Bochner, 1992, p. 80). Denzin's words are as true for me as my own. Should I have opened with them? I think not. The story that follows was not lived as an academic exercise; it was lived as a question-evoking puzzle. For the most part then, in writing about my *quest*-ioning, I think I serve my audiences best by continuing to favor the familiar, using my voice's *rebirth* register, while trying to stay close to my lived experience. There will be times however, when an academic authenticity is required, then I will exercise the *epiphany*

---

[3] Yvonna Lincoln, co-editor of the Handbook of qualitative research, says "texts seem to have built-in 'homing' devices, finding the audiences for which they are intended" (1997, p. 48). If this be so, I hope that my imagined audience includes women who search for stories to help them make sense of the spiritual dimension in their own lives as well as anthropologists, sociologists, and theologians who seek insight into the behaviors and thoughts of contemporary women who participate in woman-centred spirituality.

range. The voice I experiment with, the voice which has the breadth to accommodate both, is the voice of an academic storyteller.

I, like other narrative researchers, choose the storyteller's voice, speaking in the first person as the teller of my own tale (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 15). In so doing, I open my life to others, inviting them to "look where I did and see what I saw" (Peshkin as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 8), to vicariously participate in my academic inquiries and the more naive ones which preceded them. For similar reasons, I choose—whenever possible—to tell my story in linear time using the present tense thereby adopting an unwinding narrative style which permits readers to engage my texts where actions unfold with some sense of immediacy (Tierney, 1997, p. 28-29). Finally, I shape my telling in accordance with Donald Polkinghorne, author of Narrative knowing and the human sciences, who says that a "narrative research report is a history of the research project (1997, p. 15). To relate the history of my project then, I must return to its genesis, my life as I lived it in the early months of 1986.

April, 1986, late morning:

I step from the threshold of our garage onto the paving stone walk which leads through our winter-bleached backyard to the back door. The spring sun warms my face; I am energized. I feel so alive, so hope-filled; it is all I can do to keep from hippity-hopping. I laugh at the improbability of the impulse, the circumstances.

I have just returned from a talk with a United Church minister. I have been telling him stories about the synchronicities, newly learned Jungian-speak for meaningful coincidences, which have puzzled me in recent days. I have been asking him about the *experience* of God. He hasn't understood my questions, but thinks I am an interesting woman, has invited me back for further conversation. Short months ago, I would never have considered talking to a minister, religion hasn't figured in my daily life for a long time. I have not attended church services, except for weddings and an occasional funeral, for nearly twenty years.

I extend my right arm, reaching through warm air to touch ... to touch ... that which I am reluctant to name. "Are you there?" I address the apparently empty space beyond my fingers.

I do not feel an answer.

"What is happening to me?" I wonder.

The occupational therapist I was, some 15 years ago, remembers her psychiatric training and diagnoses: "Some sort of manic episode." The forty year old wife/mother I am shouts in protest: "Up from the ashes! Rebirth!" The visioning woman I am becoming suggests an integrative and disquieting possibility: "A manic rebirth. A spiritual awakening."

In the months leading toward my fortieth birthday—March 4, 1986—I was a stay-at-home wife and mother. For the preceding ten years my concerns had been decidedly secular; I had been primarily occupied with caring for a husband, a son, a daughter, an ailing mother as well as a three bedroom house in the suburbs. With my youngest child about to enter school, I was beginning to think about returning to the world of real work—the kind that paid dollars. I had dieted down to near wedding-weight, losing sixty pounds and four dress sizes, and, in spite of my husband's complaints and my mother's disapproval, I was choosing to spend less time at home and more volunteering for community groups, advisory boards, and an association which advocated on behalf of gifted children.

I was changing—challenged by my volunteer work and by some of the women I was meeting. Three avowed feminists, in particular, by example more than rhetoric, began pushing my thinking *out of bounds.* I began to call my fifties-flavored home life into question. When I began to think aloud about my growing edges, my husband—who I regarded as my best friend and only confidant—proved unreceptive. He found me opinionated and arrogant.[1]

Maybe that's why I didn't tell him about my bewildering feeling that some sort of teaching presence had entered my life—an internal/external, ever-present companion that offered me lessons in problemsolving, leadership, and self-efficacy. The presence had no form, no voice, felt male, and lived in the aspects of my life which lead me out of my house, away from my family. At the time, borrowing from my husband's military background and vocabulary, I saw myself as a strong "2 i c," a *second-in-command* best suited to providing loyal logistical support to those who could make decisions. I lived that vision as wife and as vice-president on several volunteer boards. The presence seemed determined to show me that I might be capable of more. No matter how careful I was to accept only paired projects in which I would serve as the junior partner, time and time again, I found myself finishing the work alone. Husband lost interest or ran short of time; presidents begged off citing conflicting commitments or colds. Such happenings felt arranged. The presence, it seemed, was assigning me progressively more difficult lessons designed to convince me that I could act independently.

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[1] This month he finds me "gentle and very focussed."

In late January of 1986, the presence suggested I was ready for my next challenge. It took me by surprise. The least demanding of my home, family, and various volunteer roles, at that time, was the work I did as vice-president of my daughter's kindergarten advisory board. When the board decided that it wanted to pilot a program to teach young children how to recognize and report inappropriate touching, I was, to begin, only peripherally involved and minimally interested. As the board began to take the necessary steps to implement the program, however, the kindergarten's president decided that she was ambivalent about the board's decision and stepped aside. She said she could not coordinate the requisite presentation to the school board asking for the policy change which would allow the program to go forward. When I was asked to take her place, I hesitated. I was afraid to speak in public and sexual abuse of children, while abhorrent, was not one of *my* causes. Still, the presence assured me that this assignment was meant for me, and, as soon as I agreed, I was rewarded. A "this was meant to be" feeling began to pervade the project as everything I needed to make the presentation fell into place with little effort.[2]

Although my presentation was falling together, the rest of my life was coming apart. As my appreciation for my extended abilities grew, it fractured a long-held and decidedly limiting self-image. I began a life review, revisiting events which I thought might hold the answers to my questions about how I came to live out of such a severely contained sense of self. I became aware that my internal self-talk was "storied," that I was telling myself tales about my life as I thought it might have been and as I thought it was. Following a twenty year moratorium on personal writing, I began to play with words. I wrote:

---

[2] As I became identified with the piloting of the CARE kit, women I had known for years and women I was meeting for the first time began to disclose how they had been sexually molested as children. I was shocked. I had known how high the statistics were; now the statistics had faces. I became convinced of the worth of the preventative program and my presentation.

MY MIND
SHE
PRICKS AND POKES AND LOOKS
IN UNFAMILIAR SPACES
SHE
WHEELS AND PRODS AND LOOKS ANEW
IN LONG FORGOTTEN PLACES
TO THRILL,
TO TRILL,

TO SPIN, AND SHOUT

LAUGH AT PERCEIVED DISGRACES.
MY GOD
IT'S GOOD TO BE ALIVE!!!
TO SHARE SOME INTERFACES!!!

I was learning so much, so quickly—from so many books and so many people—I swore I could feel the dendrites on my brain cells growing, making new and surprising connections. In-person and on paper, I experimented with **BOLD**, trying out a life written with more capital letters and exclamation points! For the first time ever, I started to think of my mind in gendered terms! My mind was female! I rejoiced in the thought! And, for the first time in a long time, MY GOD made an appearance, surfacing, on the page, in thin disguise, an exclamation of another sort.

I was dismayed to see MY GOD again. He and I had parted company years before. Not long before my nineteenth birthday, I had been admitted to Ponoka Mental Hospital for treatment of an endogenous depression. I entered hospital thinking I was a bright, high-strung girl who had a flair for writing. Five months later, I left, taking my enduring depression, twenty-five extra pounds, and the knowledge that there was something wrong with me, something that drugs, shock treatments, and a therapeutic milieu couldn't cure. I thought I was bright, but deeply flawed. I didn't write anymore; I didn't pray. I left Ponoka; MY GOD stayed there. When he rejoined me, I treated him as a faint possibility. I was more puzzled than pleased to see Him.

I was puzzled, period. I wondered at the presence, the lessons, the writing, MY GOD, and the unfamiliar, revitalizing energy which flowed into all my stagnant nooks and crannies. I wondered alone. It was clear that my husband could not join me in celebrating what I was experiencing as a larva to butterfly transformation, and I was afraid to talk to my doctor for fear he would pathologize my metamorphosis. When I monitored my mental well-being, using dusty memories of the abnormal psychology I learned as an Occupational Therapy student in the late sixties and early seventies, I declared myself sane. I went so far as to declare my sanity in writing:

> All my life, I have sought the answers to two questions.
> Who am I?
> (or sometimes in great pain)
> What am I?
> and
> **WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH ME?**
> For today, January 24, 1986, my answer to these questions is:

I am a self-actualizing woman, warm and creative and there is **NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!**

In January of 1986, I was recording the euphoric changes I was experiencing; in December of 1991, I was trying to make sense of them. My writing had turned thoughtful, analytical:

> *I believe I am ending a cycle of transformative changes which began five years ago with two Christmas gifts. The first present was a book called* Growing up gifted (Clark, 1983).[3] *From it I learned of a "new to me" psychology which used words like "self-actualization" and "transcendence," a psychology far different from the kind I had memorized as a student in the sixties. The second present was a computer which fooled the part of me which enforced my "Don't Write" rule. (The "Enforcer," an inner self, thinks in literal terms. It thought I could only write with a pen or pencil. It didn't consider the possibilities inherent in a word processor.)*

In retrospect, I clearly recognized that the computer had served as an emancipatory tool. In January of 1986, I only knew it was enabling me to write what I could not pen or pencil:

I AM FREE
I AM FREE
I AM FREE, AT LAST
FREE AT LAST TO BE ME
BUT BETTER
AND BETTER
AND BETTER, I SEE

---

[3] Clark, Barbara. (1983). Growing up gifted. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.

I AM FREE
TO CREATE
!!!ME!!!
and
HURRAH! HURRAH! HURRAH! HURRAH!
THE GIFTED CHILD COMES OUT TO PLAY!
!!

The GIFTED CHILD not only wanted to play on computer keys, she wanted to party. In the spare moments of my very busy February days, I gave her the freedom to fantacize a celebration for my rapidly approaching fortieth birthday. In my mind's eye, I could see a festival of sorts unfolding against a cloudy, blue-washed backdrop at Horizon Stage, a local theatre. My new friends and my extended family (I estimated about a hundred people) were helping me celebrate, sharing their varied talents. I always imagined that I stood at a podium, stage right, introducing the performers, their poetry, music, and skits. My imaginings were so much fun, I was tempted to phone the theatre to see if I could rent it for the evening of my birthday. Then came the phone call:

Mrs. Shaw?

Speaking.

This is Les Smyth, Assistant Superintendent, County of Parkland.

Yes.

I am organizing the next meeting of the school board. I understand you will be speaking on behalf of Broxton Park kindergarten.

Yes.

We have set the date for the meeting. It will be March 4, 7 PM.

O.K. (So much for my birthday plans!)

How long will your presentation be?

About 20 minutes in total. I plan to open asking the board for its permission to pilot the CARE kit, then I will present a half-dozen letters from other kindergarten presidents who write in support of our initiative, finally I will introduce Sharon Giesbrecht, a CARE kit facilitator, who will give a brief demonstration of the kit and answer questions. I will need about five minutes; I have told Sharon she has 15.

Fine. I hope you both feel comfortable speaking in front of a crowd. We are also hearing a group petitioning to have the County's French immersion program extended. We expect well over a hundred parents.

(Gulp) ... really?

Yes, too many for most of our meeting places. I am trying to book Horizon Stage for the evening.

He was, of course, successful in booking the venue. On March 4, I stood before an audience of a hundred, at a podium, on stage right, at Horizon Stage, my nerves in check because the "this was meant to be feeling" had intensified as parts of my playfully imagined future fit perfectly into unfolding events.

I never dismissed the convergence of my inner and outer birthday experiences as mere coincidence. They seemed far too striking to be easily set aside. I wondered if my daydreamed birthday party had been some sort of slightly less than perfect precognitive vision. I wondered if I had caught a glimpse of a prescripted future. Dr. Smyth's phone call coincided with a deepening, a darkening of my thoughts. I questioned if I was as free to create a new life as I had written. Did I really have a choice to make when I accepted the CARE kit assignment? Had I, instead, acted in accordance with a predetermined destiny?

In the days following my birthday, I grappled with these questions and more. I started to think of March 4, 1986 as the day on which I had symbolically emerged from the womb of my very private life into the complexities and potentialities of a more public forum. I felt born anew. *Reborn*, not *born again*. The latter sounded uncomfortably religious. *Born again* belonged within church walls, I was convinced I didn't. I continued to push MY GOD to the back of my mind where I didn't have to deal with Him, I had enough to contend with elsewhere.

Confluences between my inner and outer lives, although less remarkable than my birthday celebration/presentation, filled my days, troubling me. From popular self-help psychology books, I learned to name these meaningful coincidences synchronicities, "outer occurrences ... neatly arranged to mirror, confirm, or transform our ... inner lives" (Hopcke, 1997, p. 5). The books placed synchronicities in the domain of Jungian psychology; however, they did little to help my beleaguered brain make sense of what I was experiencing. I was determined to find some explanation.

As I reviewed the events leading to my birthday experience, I began to think beyond the possibility that I had somehow caught a glimpse of my destiny in the envisioned party plans. Instead, I wondered if my vivid daydreaming had somehow brought about my appearance at Horizon Stage on March 4. Could my experience be held as proof of the power of positive thinking? Was it possible that visualizing a desired outcome in sharp detail could influence unfolding events?[4] If so, how far might personal responsibility extend? Just how malleable was *reality*? I was no longer certain of my sanity.

I finally confided in my general practitioner that I feared I was losing my mind. He listened to my rebirth account, my recitation of a series of striking synchronicities, my attempts at metaphysical sense-making, then he reassured me saying that I was "saner than most." I was less reassured by his diagnosis. "You are in the midst of some sort of spiritual crisis," he said. "Have you read William James' work on religious experience?[5] Have you talked to a minister?" he asked.

---

[4] In 1986, I did not know that visualization was held by some to be a way to alter one's reality. I had heard that basketball players had succeeded in scoring more baskets by visualizing making their shots. I did not think such "mental rehearsal" accounted for my birthday experience.

Spiritual crisis? Religious experience? Minister? My God! MY GOD!

In time I did talk to a United Church minister and taught him what I knew about synchronicities. When I asked him to recommend books about religious experience he could not oblige; he said he wasn't much of a reader. Still, I liked him, thought it might be significant that he, too, had been born on March 4, so, for want of another source of guidance, I started attending his services, then confirmation classes. I reaffirmed my faith, but that proved a desperately hollow exercise. Two years later, convinced that the church of my childhood could not satisfy my spiritual hungers, I left.

In time, with self-directed study, I found a new way to tell my rebirth story. In 1991, I was writing about ecstasy, which Carol Ochs, author of Women and spirituality (1983) describes as "standing outside of oneself (ex statis)." From Ochs, I learned that ecstasy means:

> *... that the normal self, which includes our usual ways of thinking, judging, and evaluating is displaced. We are brought outside the self through an interruption in our life. While ecstasy is usually accompanied by a strong feeling, such as extreme joy or extreme grief, its essential characteristic is the displacement of our usual sense of who we are and how we think.* (p. 6)

I was grateful to Ochs for giving me the words to describe my birth-day experiences, experiences that were characterised not only by a joyful displacement of my usual self, but also by "an awareness of otherness," an alive force which imbued my life with meaning (1983, p. 6). I can not remember if she suggested how the *alive force* should be named. I could have used her help there too. Over time, I had renamed MY GOD, God (Not the Father, Not the Son, MAY-BE the Holy Spirit), Grace, The Universe, OTHER, and finally as my knowledge about and appreciation for feminism grew, (M)OTHER.

---

[5] James, William. (1936). Varieties of religious experience. New York: Modern Library.

In the fall of 1989, as part of my self-directed studies, I elected to take *Issues and Strategies in Counselling Girls and Women,* a psychology course, based in feminist philosophy and praxis, from Athabasca University. It was, for me, a course in self-healing. In the first unit, entitled "The feminine stereotype, female gender, and their impact on mental health" (Malmo, 1985, pp. 1-7), I was asked to list the messages I had heard throughout my lifetime regarding what is expected of females in childhood, adolescence, and the various stages of adulthood. Some examples were suggested: *Girls should be clean and neat, Girls can't do math. You should put your husband and children first.* The messages resonated, but I was not a feminist when I wrote a journal note about the assignment.

> *October 16, 1989:*
>
> *I am struck by the number of negative and mixed messages I have listed for this exercise. I have not listed a single positive. I often question why I came unglued in my late teens and have subsequently thought of myself as "weak" or "flawed." Obviously, the messages I heard in my early years have played a large part in my self-doubting. I have ambivalent feelings about who I am—part of that ambivalence seems to be connected with the experience of being a woman. I would like to accept myself more.*

I did come to accept myself more as I journaled throughout the course. In December of 1990, as I finished my final project, I noted the following pivotal lesson, taken from Susan Sturdivant's book Therapy with women: A feminist philosophy of treatment (1980):

> *Because female socialization teaches women to be intropunitive and to internalize blame for failures, it is especially important that they learn to recognize external sources of emotional distress and externalize part of the blame when appropriate. A necessary precondition for developing this kind of awareness would seem to be identification of oneself as part of a minority group that is oppressed on the basis of sex. In order to be able to sort out internal from external causes of distress, women must*

> *have some awareness of themselves as being treated differentially by society because of their sex.* (p. 139)

Learning that my personal failings were so consistently duplicated among women that my symptoms could just as well be ascribed to cultural causes as psychological ones (Sturdivant, 1980, p. 143) changed my life. I finished the course a feminist, writing:

> *In the past, I have suffered from depression. I thought my depressed affect was my "normal" way of being. I've changed my mind.*
>
> *I was hospitalized for depression just once. I am only now beginning to realize how deeply I was wounded by my treatment in Ponoka. When I entered the mental hospital at 18, I placed my behavior "within a framework of mental disorder." I was depressed and that meant I was sick. "Prestigeful others" i.e. psychiatrists validated my sickness by drugging me and administering shock treatments. They validated that "something was wrong with me."*
>
> *Because "something was wrong with me," I have lived most of my adult life believing that I was at risk for psychological distress, and as a consequence I believed I needed to restrict my activities lest the stress of "doing too much" unhinge my fragile stability. The treatment I received in Ponoka effectively adjusted my thinking so that I could fulfil the female role as defined for me by my family and my society.*
>
> *By limiting myself to female sex role behaviours, I lived a "half life." I was not motivated or encouraged to be assertive, ambitious, competitive, dominant, or forceful.*[6] *I thought by confining my behaviours I was guarding against depression, and for the most part, I stayed healthy.*[7]
>
> *Depression doesn't haunt me in the ways it once did. ... I have stopped thinking of depression as an illness and have*

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[6] I was borrowing from the Bem Sex Role Inventory's list of male attributes (Collier, 1982, p. 48).

[7] I stayed "healthy" according to the "double standard of mental health"—there is no significant difference between adult (sex unspecified) and masculine concepts of mental health (independence, adventurous, rational etc.) but there is a difference between adult and female (more emotional, less objective, more easily influenced) concepts. I began to recognize the problems inherent in defining mental health in women when I considered that "A woman must choose, she may become either a real woman or a healthy adult" (Collier, 1982, p. 28).

> *begun to regard it as "learned helplessness."*[8] *If learned helplessness contributes to depression, then learned mastery must be a counteractive measure. Prophylaxis no longer means restricting activities, instead it means broadening them.*
>
> *I used to talk about "treating mental illness" and "achieving mental health." My thinking was limited by the vocabulary of my medically modelled Occupational Therapy training. Now I speak of "life-promoting" or "life-negating" behaviours and of "wholeness."*

And the change model I drew in my mind to represent wholeness, a pie-chart conceptualization, not too surprisingly given the experiences of my birth-day and beyond, featured a spiritual domain.[9] Even though my counselling course did not specifically address spirituality, it had left me wondering to what degree my psychological wounds had been infected by Christianity. One reading from the course, an explication of nonconscious ideology (Bem & Bem, 1971, pp. 84-96), triggered not-so-distant memories of "please don't kill me prayers" to MY GOD. I had little doubt, that somewhere within, I still harboured the powerful, punishing, white, male God of the Old Testament and my youth. I needed an antidote for his poisonous effects. Once again, I turned to feminist literature, this time trying to understand how the maleness of the Christian God had marginalized and devalued women in general, me in particular. My readings, which stretched out over several years, introduced me to a counter-measure Goddess, one who valorized women's concerns and experiences. I could see how S/HE might be psychologically useful, so I claimed her, naming her (M)OTHER. In March of 1997, I was reading Jungian therapists Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson, authors of Dancing in the flames (1996), who referred to her as the Dark Goddess,

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[8] Bernard Seligman's theory of learned helplessness holds that "when people are conditioned to believe that events are independent of their responses, they generalize, give up control of their responses, and feel helpless" (Nikerson, O'Laughlin, & Hinchman, 1979, p. 341). Depression results.

[9] Previously, my pie chart had included only the physical, intellectual, cultural and emotional domains.

the Great Goddess, the Black Madonna, Divine Immanence, Kali, and a string of other names saying that she was "life force in matter," an "indwelling presence ... sacred energy" (pp. 3-5). I was intrigued by their suggestion that the archetype of the Dark Goddess facilitated the process of differentiation of the masculine and the feminine within an individual's psyche. I thought I'd like to meet the Divine Immanence; synchronicity provided the introduction.

The small ad in the announcement section of the religion page of the newspaper read *Dreaming the Dark Goddess: Invoking the Black Madonna*—a workshop for women. When I called to register, I was asked to bring along a cup of potting soil for the afternoon's ritual. I was curious about the dirt; it was a decided departure from the food and flowers I had been asked to bring to church socials. Admittedly leery of religious ritual, I reassured myself asking, "How weird can the workshop be. It's being held in the Education building at the university!" Two weeks later the halo effect wore off and I decided it could be pretty weird, as I, along with twenty others, processed into a candlelit Kiva, a three-tiered circular room singing:

In the places that reek of impossibility
The serpent of life crawls
She crawls upon the swollen stone
She crawls upon the swollen stone
She crawls upon the swollen stone
And loosens her only garment[10]

I was more comfortable with the afternoon's lesson, delivered by two thirty-something women whose credentials included degrees in Catholic theology. As they talked and showed slides of various goddesses and icons, I filled five scribbler pages with notes about Selene, Artemis, and Hecate; patriarchy and reconstruction; Sophia Sapientia, the Virgin of Vladimir, and Our Lady of Guadalupe. I was moved by the ritual. Upon invitation, one by one, women approached the washtub which centred the room's lowest tier, then poured out their cups of dirt, asking a question of the Black Madonna. I added their questions to my notes. *What do I need to seed in this soil? What needs to die in me in order that I know new life? What do I need to heal in myself in order that I may heal the earth? What do I do with the longing for the certainty I once knew? Where do you live in me? How do I find the words?*

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[10] McDade, Carolyn. (1993). Serpent. On Sorrow and healing [CD]. Wellsleet, MA: Surtsey Publishing.

In the days following the workshop, I wondered about the women's questions and the life stories they suggested. I wondered about the workshop itself, guessing that it was something more than a local religious anomaly. Over a year later, when I took a course in narrative methodology as part of my graduate studies, I was still wondering. On the first morning of the methodology course, upon learning that a narrative inquiry started with *wonders* rather than research questions, I thought I might have an answer to the question I had asked the Black Madonna, as I stood in candlelight, pouring out soil from my garden. Then I had asked *what is my work?* In class, on a July morning in 1998, I thought that the answer might well involve satisfying my curiosity about the workshop and its women. For my thesis research at least, my work could be gathering the stories of women drawn to spiritualities which celebrate the feminine.

Chapter 2

Methodology

Mid-September 1998, Human Ecology Graduate Seminar:

I've been dreading this! Other Human Ecology graduate students, who are further along in their programs, have told me about the first assignment for this course—formulating a research question. During my summer methodology course, anticipating what I knew would be expected of me come fall, I asked how I might pose a research question in a narrative inquiry. I was encouraged to set aside the vocabulary which included "the research question" and its alternative "a statement of the problem" and think instead of "wonders" or "puzzles." What fit for me in July fails me in September. I have felt woefully ill-prepared as I've tried to write a research question for today's class. I've struggled to shape my wonders about women who are drawn to new forms of spirituality into hypothetico-deductive language. I have not succeeded. As we go 'round the table, I hear my classmates speak of their hypotheses and variables. Knowing that I will not follow their example, I feel tension burn familiar patterns into the muscles of my shoulders and cervical spine. When it is my turn, I take a deep breath, then read out the statement which I hope will help guide my research.

I want to document the stories/the storytelling of women
who are constructing a spiritual life from a confluence of sources
THE G*D
at the centre of the women's stories
might be male, but probably isn't
may be female and More
may be Nature
might be nurture
is

For(e)most
Mystery
and
For Me
SPIDER

Our professor looks perplexed, perhaps regretting her decision to give me the leeway to develop an alternative to the research question she assigned. "Spider?" she asks. "Did you say spider?"

I wasn't trying to be deliberately enigmatic when I set out to write my guiding statement; however, I may have been unconsciously influenced by the summer's "puzzle" suggestion. As I thought and wrote and played with words, I focussed on economically expressing what most interests me, academically and personally—storytelling as a research method and women spiritual seekers who create their own forms of religious practice. An important part of my research would be finding out how the women in my study name the ineffable. As for me, I have come to think of MY GOD as SPIDER, a useful metaphor in keeping with my belief that we live in an interdependent web. I think that's important to record at the outset of the study, because, in responding to other women's spiritual life stories, I might well choose to rename MY GOD once more.

I have found writing the guiding statement useful. I note that I am not yet ready to commit to using narrative inquiry to study women's spirituality. I have written *I want* to document women's stories, not *I will*. I'm not sure I want to research my methodology as I go about gathering the stories of women spiritual seekers, and yet that is what I feel I must do. Although narrative research beckons, I find it so ambiguous. I am still learning about it, weighing its possibilities.

Because narrative studies usually proceed without a priori hypotheses and because the work is interpretive i.e. "personal, partial, and dynamic," narrativists Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber maintain that narrative research is best suited to scholars who are, to a certain degree, comfortable with ambiguity (1998, p. 10). Although I questioned whether I was such a scholar, I found narrative inquiry appealing. I had lived Clandinin and Connelly's truth that "when persons note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time, but in storied form" (1998, p. 154). Harking back to my epiphany experiences, I was reminded of the stories I created, told, revised, and retold as I drew new conclusions about my past, present, and possible futures. I recognized a personal fit when I learned that narrative inquiry is a research method based on the theory that "humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2) and that "narratology is the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose for the future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1986, p. 385).

I also shared narrative's epistemological assumption that there is no absolute truth in human reality (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 2). I identify myself as a "constructivist," one who maintains that "all knowledge is constructed ... and the knower is an intimate part of the known" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 137). In searching for explanations for my experiences with synchronicities and malleable realities, I came to the conclusion that there is no way to unequivocally "distinguish what's in our minds from what's out there in the world" (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 21). Further, I was proposing to research women's spiritual experiences and anticipated hearing stories of knowings rooted in "accessing reality through direct experience, intuition, insight, (and) connection with patterns" (Ballou, 1995, p. 10). I appreciated the congruency between the narrative approach and women's ways of knowing.

Yet another feature of narrative inquiry recommended it. Narrative reports in natural language (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 174); it is largely free of academic jargon and abstracted theory (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 16). The accessibility of narrative research texts render them democratic, available to academic and nonacademic audiences alike. Narrative's accessibility was in keeping with my growing interest in writing texts that readers could enter to share my experiences.

The thought of offering my experience to an audience did give me pause. As a narrative researcher my experiences would be central to my inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 161), and could become a topic of investigation in their own right (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 1). I wondered where along a continuum of reflexivity I might be most comfortable. Would I settle for starting my research with a brief account of why I was interested in woman-centred spirituality or would I offer a fuller telling of my involvement, permitting my experiences to be studied along with those of my study's participants? Might I, instead, choose to tell a confessional tale where my experience of doing the study became the focus of my investigation (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 11)? I felt vulnerable as I considered the degree of self-disclosure my work might demand. Visions of myself as a researcher "speaking partially naked" and "open to criticism" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 172) were cause for concern. When my work was critiqued, I could see how it might be difficult not to feel that my life was being critiqued too (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, pp. 7-8).

My own feelings of vulnerability started me thinking about the feelings of the women who would participate in my study. They, too, would likely feel vulnerable as they spoke about their spiritual lives, trusting me to receive their stories respectfully and use them judiously—a significant responsibility with huge ethical implications. As Clandinin & Connelly (1998) point out:

> *When we enter into a research relationship with participants and ask them to share their stories with us, there is the potential to shape their lived, told, relived, and retold stories as well our own. These intensive relationships require serious consideration of who we are as researchers in the stories of participants, for when we become characters in their stories, we change their stories.* (p. 169)

Who would I be in the intensive research relationship which is described by Connelly and Clandinin as being "akin to friendship," a relationship involving the "interpenetration of (the researcher's and participants') spheres of experience" (1990, p. 4)? Obviously I would not be a disengaged academic who modelled her research practices on clinicians who study the lives of their *subjects* trying to develop understandings comparable to the scientist in a laboratory (Tierney & Lincoln, 1997, p. viii); instead I aspired to the identity of "author/researcher," one who treats her "participants as co-researchers" and encourages them "to share authority, and to author their own lives in their own voices" (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 13). Were I to achieve my aspired identity, I thought I could live with any changes I might bring about in the stories of my research partners.

As I continued to learn about narrative inquiry, I discovered that the terms *narrative* and *narrative research* are used freely; however, they are seldom defined. Lieblich et al. opt for Webster's dictionary definition—*narrative* - a "discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings"—and define narrative research as "any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials" (1998, p. 2). Hinchman and Hinchman propose "that narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it" (1997, p. xvi). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) differentiate between narrative and story explaining:

> *It is equally correct to say "inquiry into narrative" as it is "narrative inquiry." By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative." Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, where as narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience.* (p. 2)

In November of 1998, when I wrote my proposal to conduct a narrative inquiry into the lives of women who practised a female-focussed spirituality, I, too, left *narrative* and *narrative research* undefined. As I began to plan my research, I set aside the task of synthesizing a definition for narrative research, concentrating instead on its features: no a priori hypotheses; an epistemological position in keeping with truths, not Truth; the use of accessible language; the centrality of the researcher's experience, and the collaborative near-friendship research relationship.[1] Echoing Connelly and Clandinin's description of the work of a narrative inquirer, I wrote my author/researcher job description. My work would be *to describe the lives of women spiritual seekers, collect and tell their stories, and write narratives of my experience.*

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[1] Anne Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson write: "There are a great many ways to use the term 'narrative.' We might summarize this variety of voices under the construct of 'creative ambiguity.' At this stage of exploration for meaning ... determining the boundaries of the concept and its exact meaning can only be harmful to progress in the field ... We are not after definition, but after intelligent application of the use of narrative and its use for the understanding of human lives" (1994, p. xi).

Chapter 3

Planning and Implementing the Study

November 1998: Research Notes

Last spring, in assignments for Women's Studies and Anthropology courses, I began to explore the possibility of studying Sophia's Circle and the women who are drawn to it. In an exploratory proposal, I considered an ethnographic study using the techniques of participant observation, survey, and interview. Then I marshalled my arguments for proposing to describe and interpret the local activities of the emergent women's spirituality movement, beginning with the academic justification—"to explore the nature of a particular social phenomenon"—suggested by anthropologists Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p. 248). Declaring my feminist standpoint, I offered further grounds for studying the women's circle echoing the words of York university's Professor Emerita Johanna Stuckey (1998) who writes:

- *The feminist commitment to recognizing diversity demands that we accept and honour the myriad forms of women's expression of their spirituality and that we engage and explore "the spiritual experience of contemporary women in a positive way" (King, 1989, xii).*

- *Spiritual concerns, orientations, and choices shape our view of the world and are usually deeply integral to our political and public behavior.*

- *Until recently, the study of religion has meant the study of male religious roles, male understanding of spirituality, and male symbols.*

- *Feminist theology studies changes in women's lives. It is important because it ... enables a conversion experience of mind, heart, and ways of living and judging (Finson, 1995, 2).* (pp. 267-268)

Finally, I *confessed* my ingenuous curiosity about the women of Sophia's Circle, saying that I, like anthropologist Ruth Benedict, claimed "a desperate longing to know how other women have saved their souls alive and accorded dignity to the rich processes of living" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 127).

All of these justifications still stand in support of the work I propose; however, the nature of my study has changed from ethnography with narrative elements to its converse—a narrative inquiry with ethnographic elements. The decision to shift emphasis and focus on women's stories has been made, in part, out of recognition that such stories are useful to other women;[1] in part because I believe, along with narrative proponents Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1998, p. 155), that stories are the closest we can come to experience and thereby to understanding personal and social history; and finally because it seems that the biographies of contemporary women who piece together their own forms of female-focussed spirituality have yet to be privileged. I have been frustrated in my search for others like me. I have not found spiritual biographies of woman telling why they are drawn to spirit-centred gatherings to participate in all-woman worship. It is their voices, their stories, set in the context of their times and lives, I would add to the record.

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[1] In making women's stories available to others, I am influenced by Carolyn Heilbrun, author of Writing a woman's life. She writes: "What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all, they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives (1988, p. 27).

Sophia's Circle: A Study Setting

When I attended the Dark Goddess workshop in March of 1997, I learned that it was a part of an on-going series offered by Sophia, an enterprising woman with a Master of Arts degree in theology. She had initiated the workshop series at spring equinox a year before. Forty women came to the first meeting of Sophia's Circle which had been advertised by flyer and word of mouth. Encouraged by the community's interest, Sophia has continued to offer her workshops regularly, about four times a year. Every meeting of Sophia's Circle focuses on a theme—creating a women's spiritual network, the role of ritual, gardening as a spiritual practice, the labyrinth experience, pagan and Christian symbols of the Yuletide, a day in the life of the mediaeval mystic Hildegard of Bingen, and May Day celebrations through time, for example—and attracts predominately middle-aged, apparently white women whose numbers fluctuate from 15 to 35, give or take a few. Sophia speculates that some of the women who attend her gatherings are nuns; others are wiccan;[1] some have a church affiliation, but need spiritual expressions with a stronger focus on women; still others do not belong to any church and seek alternative spiritual communities. I count myself as one of the latter.

I have attended Sophia's Circle regularly for the past two years. At first, I was a participant only, then, in February of 1998, I became a participant-observer, carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in support of my Anthropology and Women's Studies' coursework. With Sophia's permission, I wrote about her Candlemas celebration, which featured lessons and stories about Brighid, a pagan goddess and Christian saint, for my Anthropology course. Later, for an assignment in Women's Studies, I wrote a "think piece" describing Sophia's Circle as an example of an emergent woman's spirituality movement. More recently, when I attend Sophia's gatherings, I think of myself as an observer-participant, rather than a participant-observer.[2] My personal interest in the Circle eclipses my academic one. Either way though, the Circle is an integral part of my study. My "wonders" about women who participate in rituals which affirm their evolving sense of spirituality and womanhood began with my first Circle visit. I found the women who became my storytelling partners there.

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[1] Wiccans: witchcraft practitioners.

Finding My Storytellers

When my anthropology professor read my Candlemas account, he suggested I plan an ethnographic study of Sophia's Circle. Taking his suggestion seriously, I began talking to Sophia about the possibility. She was willing to give me access to her Circle, as long as I continued my research in an overt manner, and she was interested in sharing her own stories of her estrangement from the Roman Catholic church and of leading a women's ritualizing group. Sophia became my first co-researcher, thereafter providing me with opportunities to announce my research intention at Circle gatherings and take the names of women interested in telling their spiritual life stories.

By January of 1999, when I fully committed to conducting a narrative inquiry into the lives of practitioners of women-centred spirituality rather than an ethnographic study of Sophia's Circle, my list held 12 names. I eliminated four women immediately; they lived in distant communities. One woman's answering machine announced that she would be away until

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[2] In ethnographic work, researchers are considered participant-observers because they take part in community activities as a way to learn more about the culture under study. They participate to observe. I, on the other hand, attend Sophia's Circle to enjoy its activities and ambience. What I experience informs my research—an added benefit.

June 1 which made her ineligible; I hoped to be finished collecting stories by then. Still another woman's answering machine identified her as a counselling psychologist. With some regret I crossed her off my list; I feared her story might be too book-based.[3] I called the women who remained, reminding them of our Circle connection, asking if they would be available for interviews in February and March, telling them I would require 7-10 hours of their time. All were still interested. I asked each woman about her experience with Sophia's Circle: *How did you find out about it? How often do you attend? Which workshops do you remember best?* I also asked: *Are you engaged in a spirituality of seeking? Are you above or below the age of 30?*[4] I listened and sometimes probed for a particular interest in woman-centred worship. After my first round of phone calls, I placed the only woman who was under 30 and another who said she did not agree with "Goddess-centred religion," favouring instead an integration of Eastern philosophy and Christian tradition, on my reserve list. I went on to match schedules with the four women who were left. I expected conflicting commitments would eliminate one or more; I was wrong. I toyed with the idea of drawing names to determine who I would invite to take part in my study; however, in the end, I chose the two women whose answers to my questions best suggested a feel for storytelling—Dorian and Shililyah. I had a few shadowy memories of Shililyah; next to none of Dorian. I was far more familiar with Sophia.

After I made my choice, I noticed that Dorian and Shililyah had both attended the Candlemas celebration which Sophia led and I recorded—a fortuitous coincidence. As part of my study, I could include a detailed description of one particular meeting of Sophia's Circle along with the life stories of four of the women who attended thereby offering readers a unique opportunity to vicariously take part in a Circle gathering and to learn something about the women who participated.

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[3] I remembered her quite well from a Circle encounter. She was wonderfully articulate; however, from our brief Circle exchanges, I thought she might tell more intellectual stories than I was seeking. I wanted to hear more from the *heart*, less from the *head*.

[4] Because my own spiritual awakening had taken place around my fortieth birthday, and because most of the women who attend the Circle are middle-aged, I was particularly interested in talking to midlife women; however, my choice to make age 30 my cutoff point for eligibility was very arbitrary—more a reflection of mood than method.

Ethical Considerations

Before I began to interview, my proposed research was reviewed by the Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics Human Ethics Review Committee to ensure that it met the *University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants.* The committee approved my project and the form I developed to advise participants of their rights and provide them with further information regarding my project (See Appendix A). The consent form assured participants that although I could not guarantee their anonymity, I would make every effort to preserve their privacy. In keeping with my assurances, I offered my co-researchers pseudonyms and the opportunity to camouflage some identifying features in their stories. Two women would accept my offers to disguise elements in their accounts; one would decline.

Collecting Stories

I booked appointments for interviews with Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah, starting in late January and extending through March. In keeping with my collaborative research agenda, I offered them copies of my research proposal, suggesting that they might like to read it as a way of coming to know me and my intended work before we met in interview. All accepted, and later, in follow-up telephone calls to confirm the details of our appointments, they commented favorably on my proposal. It seemed their reading of my words helped to establish trust and engender rapport.

Shililyah, however, expressed a concern following her reading of my paper; she wasn't sure she fit my study. As an aboriginal woman who follows Sioux traditions, she is different from the women I wrote about in my proposal. I reassured her saying I thought her differences would enrich my study, that the woman-honoring elements she described as part of her teachings were in keeping with the essence of the woman-centred spirituality that interested me.

In exploring options for meeting places, Sophia suggested that we meet at the Priory, a small retreat house run by Anglican nuns who rent, at reasonable rates, quiet rooms suitable for interviewing. The Priory proved convenient for Dorian too; she lived nearby. Shililyah elected to meet with me in the Human Ecology interview room at the university; she was attending classes not far away.

During the story gathering phase of my study, I met with each woman twice, for about two hours each time. Prior to the first interview, I advised the women that I would ask them to tell me their life stories concentrating on four or five periods which they considered turning points in their spiritual unfolding, a process I learned from the work of Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, authors of The feminine face of god (1991). When we met, we reviewed my instructions, then the women began their storytelling. I said little allowing their stories to unfold as naturally as possible. At my suggestion, all the women brought an assortment of objects—photos, journals, and other pieces of memorabilia—to support their turning point stories. The items figured prominently in their tellings.

At the beginning of the first interview, I asked each woman to choose a votive candle from a small selection I provided. I explained that in lighting a candle, we were stepping beyond the dailiness of our lives, dedicating the time and place of our meeting to storytelling. I also mentioned that the candle could link us symbolically to our Candlemas encounter, and act as a bridge of continuity from the first interview to the second—I declared my intention to use the chosen candle when we met again. Shililyah and Dorian had included candles in their collection of objects. Shililyah felt it was important to use a fresh candle each time we met and came prepared. She explained that relighting a candle risks inviting the energy from a previous meeting into a new situation where it might not be appropriate. Shililyah lit a new green tea light candle to open both her first and second interviews.

The nature of the second interviews differed from the first; I asked more questions to clarify my understandings of the women's life stories and to help me learn more about their beliefs and practices. Although I developed an interview guide (See Appendix B) using questions asked by other researchers who have interviewed women about their spiritual lives (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Eller, 1993; Winter, Lummis, & Stokes, 1995), I never found reason to use it beyond reading it as part of my preparations for the second interviews.[5] I also never achieved the conversational give and take of the interview style recommended by feminist methodologists Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1991, p. 23). My second meetings with Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah were reminiscent of the question and answer format of the traditional interview with which I was more familiar. Still, I saw and heard little which suggested that the women muted their stories trying "to describe their lives in familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11) as might be expected in an authoritative interview. At least no more than one might expect storytellers to mute their tellings when they do not know their listener, however empathetic she might be, very well.

Reactions to the interviews varied. I met with Sophia first, anticipating that our on-going association would facilitate her storytelling. Instead, our relationship may have been an impediment; perhaps, some stories are best told to researchers one is unlikely to meet again. Sophia did speak frankly; however, she sometimes found it hard to look at me when she told her stories. She was clearly uncomfortable, and I wasn't sure how to set her at ease. We were both more relaxed when we came together for our second meeting. We laughed more; our discomfort lessened. Dorian found our first session's storytelling both satisfying and tiring; the second interview tired her even more. "After our first time together, I thought I should pay you; now I think you should pay me!" she said, as we walked out of the Priory together following our second meeting. I wondered, given her fatigue, if I needed to shorten my interviews. Shililyah, however, needed more time rather than less. Her stories were detailed and divergent. She seemed comfortable with her tellings; however, she expressed concern for me. She stopped once to ask, "Are you OK with this? The reason I ask is I have gone to counsellors in my younger years and literally traumatized them with some of the stuff that I shared. They broke down and started to cry which shut me down ... not a good gift to give another." I didn't cry; however, I could understand why others had.

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[5] I originally developed the interview guide to use if a woman's storytelling faltered, a situation which never arose. In preparing for the second interviews, I read over the transcripts from the first interviews formulating questions about the tellings, then I reread both my proposal and the interview guide drawing from them a few further questions to ask. The interview guide was never used to structure my exchanges with my co-researchers.

I audiotaped all the interviews using two recorders and two microphones. I reasoned that two machines should not be any more intrusive than one, and, if one machine failed—which happened in my first interview with Dorian—I would still have a recording of the interview. Using two machines also permitted me to leave copies of the interviews with the women as gifts, additions for their personal archives. I suggested they review the tapes, then advise me if they wanted to add to or amend their tellings. Sophia and Dorian acted on my suggestion; Shililyah did not. She told me she put the tapes away to give to her children so that they can, one day, learn what she has gone through and what concerned her at a particular time in her life; she herself does not want to revisit the oral version of her telling.

Transcribing the Stories and Presenting Them on the Page

I transcribed five of the interviews; a trusted friend transcribed the sixth. As the pages of transcripts mounted, I affirmed narrative inquiry's main advantage and main quandary—extremely rich data, in abundance (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 9)! I wondered how I might effectively reduce such material for presentation in my research report. In a preliminary attempt, I experimented with writing haikus to introduce readers to my co-researchers using some of the content from the first interviews. I learned the technique, which was presented as a way to capture research essences, at a qualitative research conference. Finding a way to represent the spiritual life stories told by Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah proved more challenging.

I was convinced that readers would best understand the experiences of women who practice female-centred spirituality if I privileged the women's words—if they appeared on the page in some fuller fashion than the heavily edited, out of context, bits and pieces responses often found in qualitative research accounts (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). Then too, because I wanted to give readers some sense of what it was actually like to hear the women's stories, I was in favour of creating texts which, to some degree at least, allowed the oft-times inelegant interview talk to stand. Guided by my commitment to preserve the wholeness of the women's stories and a willingness to tolerate some disfluencies and ambiguities in the presentation of their tellings, I set about fashioning the interview transcripts into research texts.

I questioned how detailed my accounts should be. Should I attempt to render all the "silences, false starts, emphases, nonlexicals like *uhm*, discourse markers like *y'know* or *so*, overlapping speech and other signs of listener participation" (Riessman, 1993, p. 12), and try to include *off-tape* notes about gestures, tears and laughter? To exclude such detail seemed to deny the reader many meaning-making opportunities, but including all of it threatened to obscure what was being said. In the end, motivated by a need to render a text of manageable size and easy readability as well as by some vanity on my part, I began to reduce the transcripts, eliminating false starts, repetitions, nonlexicals, overlaps, and noted asides. I depicted short pauses with commas, longer ones with ellipses, and kept a few discourse markers for authenticity. I chose to edit myself out of my representations of the women's tellings, reasoning that I could dispense with my on-paper presence because my in-person nods and murmurs of encouragement added little.

The representational form I eventually settled on for the tellings evolved serendipitously. Experimenting with reducing a few transcribed episodes from the women's stories, I found the resulting vignettes looked and read like found poetry.[6] I experimented further, trying to present a whole telling in like fashion, separating the piece into stanzas organized around turning point events. I listened to the tapes repeatedly, continuing to reduce my transcripts, parsing the speaker's words into lines and stanzas which I hoped would convey the essence of the stories as well as suggest the manner of their telling. I felt confirmed in my efforts when I learned that social scientist Catherine Riessman recommends such poetic structuring as a way to represent narrative discourse for analysis (1993, p. 50).[7]

When I had reduced the transcripts substantially and settled on the representation form for the tellings, I mailed drafts to my co-researchers asking for their response. All were surprised by the way I had presented their stories; however, no one objected. Subsequently I met with two of the women in person and one by telephone to go through my representations making corrections, additions, and deletions as requested.

When I finished reworking the stories, I acknowledged that they, like all such portrayals of experience, were limited; they represented "reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly" (Riessman, 1993, p. 15).[8] Still, I decided they were complete enough to honor the stories and thoughts of my storytelling partners. Perhaps too complete. I had far too many pages to include in a research report and little idea of how to reduce their number. I returned to my guiding statement—*I want to document the stories/the storytelling of women who construct their spirituality from a confluence of*

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[6] Found poetry—"A poem consisting of words found in a nonpoetic context (such as a product label) and usually broken into lines that convey a verse rhythm. Both the term and the concept are modelled on the *object trouvé* (French: 'found object'), an artifact not created as art or a natural object that is held to have aesthetic value when taken out of its context." (Mirriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature, 1995, p. 430).

[7] I have since learned that another social scientist, Laurel Richardson, has experimented with writing a participant's life as a poetic representation (1992, p. 130). Like Richardson, in turning transcripts into a poetic form, I used *only* the words of my partners and tried to capture their tone and diction. Unlike her, I did not make use of poetic devices such as repetition, off-rhyme and meter to convey the narratives.

[8] Riessman maintains that a reader can enter into the meaning-making process only when the full narrative is included or made available (1993, p. 43). Accordingly, readers who wish to analyse the women's stories or our interview exchanges more deeply than my representations allow are invited to contact me for copies of more detailed transcriptions.

sources—to help me decide what was essential. I decided to highlight the self-directed stories the women told in their first interviews and, for the most part, set aside the question and answer material from the second. The stories were the "why of the work" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 157).

Chapter 4

"What's Going On Here?"

June 1999: Research notes

> *In a study of experience it is the researcher's intentionality that defines the starting and stopping points. One of the common laments of those who focus on experience in all its messy complexity is that they lose track of the forest for the trees and find it hard to draw closure to a study. There are no easy ways to sort this out beyond constantly attending to the researcher's purpose from beginning to end of the study. Constant attention to the why of the the work goes beyond the simple matter of keeping the researcher's eye on matters of relevance. At least as important is the almost inevitable redefinition of purpose that occurs in experiential studies as new, unexpected, and interesting events and stories are revealed* (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 157).

For the past week or so I have read and reread Clandinin and Connelly's passage trying to decide how I will know when I am finished my study. They have me thinking about my "intentionality," the purpose of my work, and the refining of that purpose. To begin, my intention was to document the life stories of women drawn to Sophia's Circle, women who I thought were spiritual seekers determined to create their own life-enhancing spirituality. Somewhere along the line, I learned to ask the qualitative researcher's primordial question: "What's going on here?" (Locke, 1993, p. 97) and began to think of how I was defining the "here" of my study.

"Here" might be thought of as a burgeoning social phenomenon—the sociohistorical context for my work. Following the Black Madonna workshop, I wondered if Sophia's Circle was some local religious anomaly or a part of "something bigger." A literature review helped me identify the "something bigger" as a grassroots women's spirituality movement which has "evolved in response to the insights of the women's movement, feminist research, the decline of Christendom, and the revival of pagan practices" (Northup, 1997, p. 2).

"Here" might also be thought of as Sophia's Circle itself, one example of the "congeries of centres and courses run by individual teachers, therapists, and entrepreneurs rather than a priesthood" (Puttick, 1997, p. 242) which characterize the far-flung spirituality phenomenon. Even though I did not choose to make Sophia's Circle—which can be thought of as a workshop series offered by an entrepreneur who caters to women spiritual seekers—the focus of my inquiry, it figures prominently in my work. I wonder how best to feature it. Finding that all of the women I would interview had participated in the Candlemas celebration feels serendipitous; I have been given the opportunity to present a detailed description of a Circle meeting as an example of the activities women engage in when they ritualize "using symbols and metaphors that affirm their experience" (Northup, 1997, p. 17).

Lastly, "here" might be thought of as the lives of the women drawn to Sophia's Circle. Their stories also offer answers to the "What's going on here?" question, providing insights into who the women are and what life events led them to spiritual exploration and Sophia's Circle.

I think I will have achieved my redefined purpose—answering the "What's going on here?" question—when I present my answers in a literature review which details the women's spirituality movement, my Candlemas participant-observer's account, and my representations of the life stories of some of the women who attended the St. Brighid's Day celebrations.

A Burgeoning Religious Phenomenon

In recent years, a religious phenomenon shaped by women determined to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives has grown and flourished in Canada, the United States, parts of continental Europe, England, and Australia (Eller, 1993, p. 3). Its forms are variant—workshops, communes, small groups, retreats, training schools, mail-order courses (Eller, 1993, p. 11)—as are its names—goddess worship, feminist spirituality, women's spirituality, womanspirit movement, women's liturgical movement, and more (Christ & Plaskow, 1979; Eller, 1993; Northup, 1997; Stuckey, 1998). However named, what these various forms offer is an alternative to religious traditions which view the male, "particularly the upper-class white male, as prototype of the human and the divine" (Ochshorn & Cole, 1995, p. 1). A woman-centred spirituality group, usually focused on ritual activity, attracts "women disaffected with traditional religion, politically attuned feminists, unchurched women looking for a meaningful spiritual experience, former New Age seekers, and women of all classes and ethnicities looking for safe and affirming community" (Northup, 1997, p. 11). Sophia's Circle is an example of one such group.

Antecedents of Sophia's Circle

Woman-centred spirituality groups, like Sophia's Circle, trace their genesis to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when feminist writers such as Mary

Daly[1] and Rosemary Radford Reuther[2] began to generate a growing awareness of the ways in which women were devalued in western religious traditions. Religious feminists, like Daly and Reuther, charged Judaism and Christianity with betraying women, arguing that the monolithic images of a male deity "legitimized male supremacy and female subordination—(that a) patriarch in heaven, celebrated in sexist symbols and metaphors, justified the rule of the fathers in the family and society" (Ochshorn & Cole, 1995, p. 1). Some women believed they could transform male-based religious tradition and achieve full partnership with men by reforming from within—"integrating women into existing liturgies, through ordination, imaginative biblical interpretation, and use of expansive language in ritual texts" (Northup, 1997, p. 2). Others thought "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde as cited in Van Dyke, 1992, p. 4) and abandoned biblically based religion altogether believing it to be irremediably sexist (Gross, 1996, p. 52). The search for new religious forms which focused on women had begun.

Ad hoc groups of women began to form to "discuss their frustration with religious institutions, their unmet spiritual needs, and the possibility of doing things differently" (Northup, 1997, p. 14). Secular feminism was already functioning as a kind of spirituality for some (Eller, 1993, p. 42). In many instances, the consciousness-raising groups of the mid-70s, a "combination therapy session, discussion group, healing circle" (Stuckey, 1998, p. 270), were evolving into worshipping communities. Learning that many pre- and non-biblical religions focused on a female deity, some emerging groups began to practice forms of goddess worship, believing that "only the contemplation of a female deity (could) resonate with their spiritual intuition" (Northup, 1997, p. 11). Simultaneously, groups of pagans and wiccans also started "to focus on the goddess as a symbol of the sustaining divine presence" (Northup, 1997, p. 15). From the beginning, paganism,[3] Wicca,[4] and what was becoming known as spiritual feminism tended to be equated; however, as Starhawk, a highly respected Wiccan spokeswoman and author, insists "feminist spirituality, Paganism, and Witchcraft overlap but are not identical communities" (Northup, 1997, p. 12). Northup sums the evolution of these various groups saying: "It was obviously a grassroots movement: they had no central organization, no hierarchy of leadership, no effective means of widespread communication, no evangelistic imperatives. They just started happening all over as women in different places came to similar recognitions" (1997, p. 15).

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[1] Mary Daly, author of such books as The church and the second sex, Gyn/ecology, and Beyond god the father, became a foremother of women-centred spirituality "in attempting to revision the possibilities of daily life by her philosophical reconstruction of language and her insistence that patriarchal concepts of God were no longer usable for women (VanDyke, 1992, p. 5).

[2] Rosemary Radford Reuther, has a PhD. in classics and patristics from Claremont Graduate School, is the Georgia Harkness Professor of Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary and a prolific author. Among her many works are The new woman/new earth: Sexist ideologies and human liberation; Sexism and god-talk:Toward a feminist theology; WomenChurch: Theology and practice of feminist liturgical communities; and Gaia and God: An eco-feminist theology of earth and healing (Winter, Lummis, & Stokes, 1995, p. xi).

Contemporary Manifestations

Northup's (1997) imagistic description of the present day movement echoes her description of its evolution and captures its inconstant nature:

> *In its contemporary manifestation, the movement toward women's worship has no central trunk, rather it has evolved as random branches, with no coordination, from the discontents and yearnings of women, in one small group after another. Many of these branches bloom briefly, then soon wither. Others shift and change and merge.* (p. 7)

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[3] Paganism or neopaganism: a religious movement aimed at reviving or creating anew the ancient nature religions of Europe, often, more specifically, of Britain. In spite of neopaganism's claim that the movement dates to ancient times, it also has a more recent history. Much of neopaganism's practice and lore derive from the 1950s writing of British folklorist, occultist, and nudist Gerald Gardner (Eller, 1993, p. 51).

[4] "American witches use the terms 'witchcraft' and 'Wicca' interchangeably. By using 'witchcraft,' they stress the connections between contemporary groups of witches and earlier practitioners of witchcraft, including mediaeval European witches ... They use 'Wicca' to point out the connection between contemporary witches and the herbalists and 'wise women' in traditional European society" (Scarboro & Luck, 1997, p. 78).

She is ever careful to speak of the movement in the broadest of terms—"a grassroots movement to create women's spirituality groups" (1997, p. 11), for example—foregoing a succinct grace to ensure a definition capacious enough to include all the groups which perpetuate earlier initiatives: Christian and Jewish women who continue working within the ritual structure of their religions, exerting pressure for the fuller inclusion of women and women's concerns in ritual practice; "Women-church, a loose convergence spearheaded primarily by Roman Catholic women, most of whom still claim allegiance to their church"(pp. 11-12); "goddess worship groups seeking to recover beliefs and practices that predate the Semitic traditions"(p. 12); and feminist experiential communities—study groups, literary discussion circles, activist organizations—"that perceive a spiritual dimension in their shared lives" (p. 12).

In her delineation of contemporary women's ritualizing groups, Northup (1997) includes Wicca as a distinct entity.[5] She argues against the common conflation of goddess spirituality and feminist Wicca, calling them different—"albeit sometimes intertwined—women's religious movements" (p. 12). In differentiating the two, Northup observes:

> *Wiccans often are not exclusively intent on a female deity, nor do they consistently consider their traditional roots to be identical with those of goddess religions. Although both groups share a deep grounding in the power and sacredness of nature, the ritual practice of "the craft," with its frequent focus on magic, often differs radically from that of goddess worship. Moreover, not all Wiccans are feminist.* (p. 12)

Indeed, it is important to note, more generally, that not all women who participate in alternative ritualizing groups are feminist. Although Northup concedes the close link between the rise of feminist consciousness and the development of women's spirituality groups, she warns against a "facile identification of women's worship with feminist worship" (p. 18). Says Northup: "Not all participants in women's ritual gatherings, even in the West, identify themselves as feminist. Some may simply rejoice in the freedom of all-woman worship; others may be looking for a way to correlate their faith with their personal experience" (p. 19). She credits German feminist Theresa Berger with being one of the few scholars to acknowledge the broader context of women's ritualizing, noting that Berger shuns the term *feminist spirituality* in favor of the more inclusive and, perhaps, more accurate term *women's liturgical movement* (p. 19).

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[5] Northup does not include neopagan groups in her present day delineation, presumably because in such groups men and women worship together.

Cynthia Eller is one scholar who does not eschew *feminist spirituality.* Although she writes of the same "spontaneous, grass-roots movement with no overarching organization, no system of leadership, and no regularized form of membership" (Eller, 1993, p. 11) as Northup, she conceptualizes it differently, leaving out reformers who stay within traditional religions. In her book Living in the lap of the goddess: The feminist spirituality movement in America, Eller posits the movement as a new religion which offers women "a spirituality, separate from institutional, patriarchal religion and in addition to the secular or political feminism offered by the culture at large" (Bednarowski, 1995, p. 193). Eller (1993) says the feminist spirituality movement is:

> - *Separatist, in the sense that it is focused on women. Men are excluded.*
> - *Centred outside traditional religion and can be seen most accurately to be part of an alternative religious milieu.*
> - *Feminist, broadly defined. The women who occupy the centre of feminist spirituality see themselves operating out of some sort of feminist consciousness, believing either women's condition or the general state of gender roles in society as we find them are unsatisfactory and need to be changed.* (p. 7)

Eller's work—based on participant observation in rituals and retreats, interviews with 32 spiritual feminists, and her reading of primary literature—is an invaluable resource for understanding "the movement toward women's spirituality gatherings in the West" (Northup, 1997, p. 13) or at least a significant part of it. She says it is generally agreed that feminist spirituality has five major characteristics (1993, pp. 3-4):

- *Virtually all practitioners of feminist spirituality view the religion as being uniquely empowering for women: empowerment (sometimes more conservatively termed healing) is both the goal and the reward of feminist spiritual practice. Whatever works to make a woman stronger is valid feminist spirituality.*

- *There is ... a consistent interest in ritual as a tool of empowerment and a means of communication with the sacred, and in some form of magic, divination, or the cultivation of psychic skills.*

- *Nature is almost universally revered, and often personified as a (or the) goddess or as Mother Earth. Women, like nature are revered, usually for their female biological functions (particularly menstruation and childbirth).*

- *Feminist spirituality always relies on an interest in the feminine, or at least gender, to sustain its system of symbols, beliefs, and practices.*

- *Much of the feminist spiritual imagination is given over to speculation about how gender relations have been structured over the history of the human race. This "sacred history" is an ongoing reconstruction of Western history according to which prehistoric societies worshipped goddesses, and were possibly matriarchal as well, until they were replaced by patriarchal societies, which are today the status quo worldwide. Most spiritual feminists see themselves working to move this history into its next stage, in which patriarchal societies will be replaced by cultural forms more beneficial to the*

> *human race, and especially to women.*[6]

Somewhat arbitrarily, Eller, says any woman who adheres to three of the five characteristics—i.e. "valuing women's empowerment, practising ritual or magic, revering nature, using the Feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis, and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favoured by the movement," (1993, p. 6)—may be considered a spiritual feminist. Some women who call themselves *spiritual feminists* thinking the term broad enough to encompass an honoring of the spiritual dimension in their lives as well as adherence to feminist philosophy or principles might forego its use, however, if it meant claiming three of Eller's characteristics.[7] The question of how to name oneself as part of the *alternative religious milieu* is no less a problem today than it was almost twenty years ago, when Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, editors of the landmark anthology, Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion (1979) remarked: "It is difficult to find a suitable term for those who reject biblical tradition. Some identify themselves as post-Christian, post Jewish, pagan, witch, Goddess worshipper, or simply members of the womanspirit movement, but none of these terms is accurate for the whole group" (p. 10).

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[6] Professor Emerita Johanna Stuckey (1998) offers this telling of "the sacred history" based on her reading of Elizabeth Davis (1972) The first sex; Merlin Stone (1977) When god was a woman; Marija Gimbutas (1982) The language of the goddess: Unearthing the hidden symbols of western civilization; Riane Eisler (1987) The chalice and the blade: "After millennia of prehistoric peace and harmony in woman-centred; goddess-worshipping cultures, violent and aggressive conquerors erupted from desert or steppe, devastated these gentle matriarchal societies, and, by force, instituted male-dominance or patriarchy. Such invaders usually include the Israelites who 'conquered' Canaan. The sacred history or myth follows societal development from the arrival of the patriarchal invaders through the present day, the witch-hunts of the early modern period forming a major example of the continuing persecution of Goddess worshippers. The myth tells women about ancient Goddess worship; about ancient matriarchies; about women's creativity and wonderful bodily re-empowerment in a Goddess-centred religion. This myth is a living story remade in every telling, by every teller ... Given the tremendous empowerment women receive through Goddess worship, it is no wonder Feminist Goddess Worshippers get annoyed at scholars who insist that their history did not emerge as myth suggests!" (p. 283)

[7] As Eller has it "almost all spiritual feminists focus on the Goddess"(1993, p. 182). I think some women who define themselves as spiritual feminists would resent being thought of as goddess worshippers. I know I would.

The Object of Women's Worship

Another *naming* challenge facing ritualizing women is finding words to speak of the numinous. For some, it might be enough to invoke god as mother or, perhaps friend or protector, instead of as father—implying substantive differences—however for others the word god is irrevocably associated with the Bible and, according to sociologists of religion, Allen Scarboro and Phillip Luck, "images of the divinity as distant, judging, vengeful, universal ... standing over and against the human" (1997, p. 71). Scarboro and Luck go on to say: "the maleness of the Christian God has marginalized and devalued women: god the father and god the son have told women their primary religious roles are always subordinate to that of men" (1997, p. 72). No wonder some women turn away from God-talk, and speak of the Goddess as personal deity or symbol. Christ (as cited in Stuckey, 1998, p. 283) explains why women need the symbol of the Goddess: "to provide acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power; to affirm the female body and the life cycle expressed in it; to represent the positive valuation of will in a Goddess-centred ritual; to allow women to reevaluate the ties women have to one another and to their heritage."

While some women relate to the oneness of the Goddess as a counter to the oneness of the traditional God; others celebrate her multiplicity (Stuckey, 1998, p. 283). The Goddess shows herself in a limitless array of faces—as maid, mother, crone; as creatrix, nurturer, destroyer; as daughter, wife, mother (Scarboro & Luck, 1997, p. 72)—and she appears in innumerable forms—as "Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna"[8] (Stuckey, 1998, p. 283).[9] Scarboro and Luck speak to her appeal saying: "The goddess's very multiplicity distinguishes her sharply from the deities of the Western monotheistic traditions. Her multiplicity opens her to a wide variety of modes of apprehension, and makes each of those modes holy and pregnant with significance ... the goddess affirms multiple ways of being in the world, a multiplicity which has increasingly come to characterise modern life" (1997, p. 72).

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[8] The Goddess chant: used here as representative of a few of the female goddesses some women hold sacred.

[9] Some worshippers believe there is one Goddess who manifests in different form, while others believe in numerous Goddesses (Eller, 1993, p. 133).

Of course, some would set aside names like god and goddess altogether maintaining that the divine transcends gender, even personhood (Scarboro & Luck, 1997, p. 71); still others would question "why god at all (Hunt, 1995, p. 30). Northup concludes: "Despite the obscurity of the object of much of women' ritualizing or even the near-atheism of some women's spirituality—at the core is something larger,[10] if only self-discovery through relationship. There would be little point in 'religious' ritualizing otherwise" (1997, p. 24).

Role of Ritualizing

Because conceptions of the ineffable are so varied and personal they can not provide common ground for practitioners, but collective ritual can and does. Spiritual feminism is a religion of *doing* more than *believing*, a religion focused on ritual practice (Eller, 1993, p. 82) that is "participative, circular, aesthetic, incarnate, communicative, life-enhancing and joyful (as a) deliberate rejection of the rigidly unemotional, overly verbal, hierarchical, and dominative liturgical practice of the mainline churches" (Winter, Lummis, & Stokes, 1995, p. 187). When women gather to worship, apart from men, they "ritualize what is of significance to them as individual women and collectively as female. Rites of passage, seasons of earth, and seasons of the heart, significant events and ordinary occasions are the stuff of their liturgies"

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[10] When asked to define spirituality, many people answer *relating to something larger than oneself,* or words to that effect, an answer that I have always found frustrating. Accordingly, I offer two definitions that I find helpful: 1) "Spirituality is the way in which a person understands and lives within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy, or ethics that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, and the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfections being sought" (Principe, 1983, p. 136). 2) "Spirituality is the experience of the oneness and interconnectedness of all phenomena." John Miller (Source unknown.)

(Winter, Lummis, & Stokes, 1995, p. 187). Rituals are "tools for many things: worship, supplication, celebration, personal transformation, ecstatic experience, and management of both psychic and material reality" (Eller, 1993, p. 82). Though ritual's most important function is laying down a pathway to the sacred, it has social value as well. According to Eller: "Ritual is the primary way in which spiritual feminists help each other find a meaningful place in the world, to experiment with new and different social values, and to build a sense of community among themselves" (1993, p. 83).

Spiritual Experimenters: The Women of the Movement

Eller profiles a typical spiritual feminist[11] as a white, middleclass, fairly well-educated baby boomer of Jewish or Christian background who usually, though not always, has had a significant amount of religious training. Such a woman might well be a lesbian—Eller found a disproportionate number of lesbians in the feminist spirituality movement—although the majority of spiritual feminists consider themselves heterosexual (1993, pp. 18-23). Commenting on another disproportion in the movement—the high number of baby boomers—Eller points out that "even if feminist spirituality were equally attractive to women aged zero to one hundred" (p. 18), there would still be higher numbers of women in their thirties and forties because there are more women in this age group than in the general population. She cautions against thinking of feminist spirituality as a baby boom phenomenon, saying that there are a significant number of older women adherents. She further cautions that "there are many women who are exceptions to one or more (or all) of these rules" (p. 18); however, she maintains that most spiritual feminists approximate the profile.[12]

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[11] I am using Eller's profile of spiritual feminists because I believe her demographic descriptions hold for the majority of women who practice woman-centred spirituality. I would use the label "spiritual feminist" with caution when applying it to members of Sophia's Circle. See page 49 for my caveats regarding the name.

Sophia's Circle: One Manifestation of the Women's Spirituality Movement

If the women's spirituality movement is considered a macrocosm, then Sophia's Circle is its microcosmic reflection. In keeping with Eller's descriptions for spiritual feminism (1993, p. 7), the Circle, too, is separatist—only women attend; and it is part of an alternative religious milieu, founded in the belief that there is a need for women of diverse faith paths to meet outside of church walls to celebrate the feminine. Because Sophia is a feminist, and because her rituals and lessons celebrate women and women's concerns, it can also be said that her Circle is "broadly feminist" even though it is quite likely that some women who attend regularly might not regard themselves as feminist. Judging by appearances, in keeping with Eller's demographic profile of women who practice spiritual feminism, those who attend the Circle are white and mostly middle-aged—although one workshop, which featured gardening as a spiritual practice, attracted a significant number of younger women. One might also deduce that participants have disposable income in keeping with middle class earnings and vocations[13] —workshops fees are $40.00[14] for an afternoon's event. Finally, given that Sophia's advertising often mentions ritual, one might surmise that its appeal draws some women to Sophia's Circle to reap both the sacred and social benefits Eller posits (1993, p. 83).

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[12] Deborah Lutke, writing of her participant observation research in a caucasian, babyboomers' Neo-Esoteric Spirituality group (N=14), claims its demographic data "supported the demographics presented in (six) other studies of similar activities" (1994, p. 26). Her participants all worked in "helping professions" (e.g. social work, counselling, emergency intervention) and eight of the 14 had been involved in twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous. I am uncertain whether she means that the six studies she cites also featured participants who worked in helping professions and who were twelve-steppers, or whether the match could be found in their ages and race.

[13] From time to time, Sophia has participants fill out information sheets. She has learned that many women who attend her Circle are nurses and teachers, a finding reminiscent of Lutke's participants who were all members of helping professions (1994, p. 26). Two of the women in my study are social workers; the third is studying social work.

[14] Recently raised from $25.00.

An Expression of Particularity

After the Black Madonna workshop, I wrote "that it was unlike any workshop I had previously attended; it did not teach *how to* anything."[1] It appealed to my intellect (there was a lesson regarding iconography and sacred sites), and it spoke to my spirit (I shared in a ceremony which called forth hope and renewal). Most of all I appreciated the opportunity to ritualize within a community of women willing to push beyond tradition in their search for resources to challenge their minds and nurture their souls. In attending Sophia's Circle faithfully over time, I have learned to expect three common elements in a workshop—a lesson, a ritual, and the opportunity to connect with other spiritual seekers; I have also learned that individual meetings are more different than alike. The Circle meets irregularly in different locations. Themes vary. The population of women who attend is fluid. Accordingly, I offer the following St. Brighid and Candlemas account with a caveat—my description should not be taken as an instance of typicality of either a meeting of Sophia's Circle in particular or a women's spirituality gathering more generally. As Northup advises, "given the postmodern assumptions of feminist worship, each liturgical event is understood as an expression of the particularity of the group engaged in it; it is flexible, and adaptable to its time, place and circumstance, and thus it is not reproducible" (1997, p. 6).

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[1] After my epiphany experiences in 1986, as part of my "learned mastery" program, I attended many workshops. I learned *how to* communicate effectively, *how to* make powerful presentations, *how to* overcome my fear of public speaking, *how to* journal according to Ira Progoff, *how to* use right brain techniques to increase creativity, *how to* ...

Encountering Brighid: An Ethnographic Exercise

Tacked to my bulletin board is a Kelly green paper handbill advertising a meeting of Sophia's Circle. It reads:

Brighid: Between the Worlds

A workshop for women interested in encountering the Celtic triple Goddess of healing, poetry, and smithcraft, and her successor in the woman Brighid, "Mary of the Gael," legendary nursemaid of Jesus, Abbess and patron saint of agriculture, keeper of fire, the earth and the poor.

We will experience:

- Early Celtic chant
- Brighid crosses & other cult images
- Lore from her holy wells & hearths
- Ritual in honor of the midwinter feasts of Imbolc and Candlemas

Workshop Presenters:

Maureen (Storyteller)
Sophia, M.A. (Theology)

Saturday, January 31, or Sunday, February 1, 1998
1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
11135 - 65 Ave. (Westwood Unitarian)
Cost: by Jan. 23 $25.00/person
from Jan. 23, $30.00/person
(nonrefundable)

For more information or to register call:
Marie @ 962-5882

I do not call Marie; she calls me. My name is on her phone list because I have attended Sophia's Circle in the past. I may have picked up the handbill at the last Circle, or, just as likely, at a Catholic retreat house or metaphysical bookstore. Marie reminds me to register for the workshop early, to save a few dollars, and, if I do decide to come, to bring a candle to be blessed and given away at the end of the afternoon. I put a cheque in the mail and add the workshop to the January 31 square on my calendar. I'm not sure why I am choosing to attend. I have no particular interest in meeting the Celtic triple goddess Brighid, though I can claim the appropriate lineage—legitimately Welsh on my mother's side, illegitimately Irish on my father's. Still, based on my previous experiences with the Circle, I look forward to stepping outside the boundaries of routine and spending an afternoon exploring an expression of spirituality I don't pretend to understand.

I arrive at Westwood Unitarian, a modest frame church,[2] in Edmonton's Parkallen district, with only five minutes to spare. I pause in the entry way for a few moments to consider whether or not to remove my winter boots, thinking: "If we will be treading on sacred ground, we might be expected to present in sock feet." I compare the numbers of pairs of boots in the vestibule to the number of cars parked in front of the church, and decide to join the bootwearing half of the congregation.

I open the door to the sanctuary and am met by soft sounds—taped Celtic music and women's voices. I stop at the back of the room to take off my coat and drape it over a chair, say hello to Marie, pick up my receipt and make a name tag. I murmur greetings to Sophia, the Circle's leader, who gives me two slips of paper as I make my way, past her, to a seat on the extreme left end of a horseshoe of chairs. I don't recognize anyone from past Circle meetings, although one woman looks vaguely familiar. I take out a coil scribbler and begin to record my first observations.

The room, roughly 25' x 42', has worn hardwood floors. The runner of forest green indoor/outdoor carpet, which halves the room and the U-shaped space of our horseshoe, is centred by an arrangement of miscellany—reeds and pussywillows; draped cloths of gold satin and woven wool; a platter with three cross-scored loaves of quick bread; a white pillar candle in a pottery bowl glazed in shiny shades of greens and blues; other candles, of assorted colors, floating in glass bowls filled with water; and what might be a god's eye of wood—an altar on the floor. About a half-dozen plain glass windows line each of the east and west walls so the room is filled with natural light, although, the direct rays of the *low-in-the-sky* winter sun have been partially blocked by squares of hardboard placed in the west-facing windows. To the south, the front of the room, is a platform raised about 18" off the floor, a stage of sorts. Stage left features a wooden podium (if this were any other church but Unitarian I'd say pulpit); I don't expect it will be used this afternoon. Centre stage is covered by a huge pile of cut reeds; stage right, a display of books about Irish lore, Celtic legend and the Goddess. At the front of the stage are packages of light purple and dark blue pipecleaner as well as a couple of pairs of wire cutters; at the back, a screen. We can expect a slide show later.

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[2] Up until now, the Circle has always met outside of church walls, usually University of Alberta sites. I consider Westwood Unitarian as almost equally neutral ground.

The women, who up until now have been clustered in twos or threes talking or looking at the books, begin to take seats. Quick count: we are 16—excluding Sophia and the woman I guess, correctly as it turns out, is Maureen. We are all dressed casually: slacks or leggings, sweaters or sweatshirts, runners or hiking boots, socks or flat shoes. I'm concentrating on feet again, contrasting what I'm seeing with the *Sunday-go-to-meeting* high-heeled pumps of my past. Looking for signs of spiritual allegiance, I check out the pendants some of the women wear—a harmony ball, a crystal, a ceramic circle, two stone bears, one cross. I'm not sure I can make anything out of that. Most women, as expected, are middle aged, 35 to 60 plus. One woman is seven or eight months pregnant. I think it's her obvious fertility which makes me think of her as younger than the rest of us, but she may be in her midthirties. I'm not particularly good at guessing ages.

Sophia and Maureen, I'm guessing they are both thirty something, take their places on either side of a slide projector in the closed end of the horseshoe. Maureen, standing, picks up a tin whistle and begins to play. She is tall, 5"7' or so , slim, and has shoulder-length ash blonde hair. She wears a coarsely textured cream-colored tunic over a long-sleeved muted green top.

Her long skirt, of some soft material, is green too. She looks the part of the storyteller we've been led, by the advertisement, to expect. She and dark-haired Sophia hand out photocopies of a song we will use in ritual. We learn the tune and practice:

> *I sing praise to Brighid, Daughter of Ireland*
> *Daughter of every land, all our people praise her.*
>
> *Shining torch of Leinster, Burning o'r the land,*
> *Head of all of Ireland's youth. Head of gentle*
> *women.*
>
> *Sharp and hard the Winter, bitter, cold, and dark.*
> *But on each St. Brighid's Day, Spring is brought to*
> *Eireann.*

Sophia introduces Maureen to us an author, storyteller, and choreographer. Maureen, we are told, is concerned with social justice and peace. In turn, Maureen tells us about Sophia, a social worker and poet. Both women, we learn, have made recent pilgrimages: Maureen to Ireland, Sophia, Scotland.

Sophia welcomes us to an afternoon of ritual honoring women and women's history. She says that we come from diverse faith positions—Christian, Unitarian, and other, nameless, paths. She asks that we honour each others' stories, to respect confidences. We take a few minutes to introduce ourselves to those sitting nearby. In my group of four, two are newcomers to the Circle. One, it seems, has come as a bit of a lark; the second, an aboriginal woman who belongs to a native women's healing group, has come to extend her circle experience; the third, like me, says she has come again because she enjoyed herself on previous visits. Formalities complete, we return our attention to Maureen and Sophia.

Setting the pattern for the afternoon, they take turns speaking. They tell us that we meet in fragile, newborn time, a time layered in Christian and pagan tradition. Today is the eve of Imbolc, a festival celebrated on February

1, the day the Earth washes her face, the day Old Woman Winter gives birth to the New Child Year, and the day that Mary returned to the temple after giving birth to Jesus. February 1 is Brighid's Day honoring both Celtic goddess and Christian saint; February 2, Candlemas, is the day some Christians (mostly Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican) bless the candles that will be burned on the altars during the year.

We are introduced to our first ritual. We will all leave the sanctuary, taking with us a reed from the stage, the slips of paper we were given upon arrival, and the candle we have brought to be blessed and given away. The women who have come without candles are given tea lights so they can participate fully. We form two lines in a back entry way and prepare to process back into the sanctuary, first invoking the Goddess as each woman reads aloud out the name written on her slip of paper: *Macha, Danu, Aine, Sidhe, Fea.* I read out *Buananna,* grateful for the pronunciation prompt *(Boo-nana)* which follows the name. I give my second slip of paper to a woman who has left hers in her purse. The invocation continues: *Eirinn, Feimhean, Morrigan ...* and when complete, following instructions, we re-enter the sanctuary, saying our own full name as we step over the threshold. As each woman identifies herself, the rest respond saying "Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home!" We are instructed to place our candles—votive, tea, and tapers—on the altar before returning to our seats. I have brought a scented plum-coloured votive, in a small pink flowered gift bag, which I set in the the folds of satin.

Maureen speaks briefly of Brighid as a goddess of fiery gifts, one who inspires poetry, compassion and creativity. In my notebook, I try to capture her words and the flaming imagery they evoke, but I miss much of what she says. I hope the others who are taking notes are having more luck. She takes what I thought was a wooden God's eye from the altar and introduces us to the Brighid cross. She learned how to make the crosses when she visited Ireland, and now she will teach us the craft. We are instructed to take the reeds from the stage, cut them into ten inch lengths, then proceed to weave the reeds into crosses using the pictorial instructions on the back of our song sheets. The noise level in the room rises as women cut reeds, consult, and attempt the assigned task. The reeds are very dry. They crack and break, resisting our best efforts. One quick-thinking woman soaks her reeds in the candle water and enjoys greater success. I decide that I will learn how to make the cross using the more compliant pipecleaners, then take my reeds home where I can soak them properly before attempting to fashion them into a cross. After 15 minutes or so, Sophia has to call us back to our places several times before we are ready to give up our handiwork.

After we are settled in our chairs once more, Sophia and Maureen begin showing slides of maps, burial mounds, and holy wells. They teach us a bit of prehistory and tell us of their travels in Ireland and Scotland. My notes are sketchy, thematically unrelated. I write that the Celts were an expansionist, matrilineal culture in which slavery and human sacrifice were practiced. In their world, the Goddess was in ascendance. Women held positions of power; they were warriors, lawyers, and queens. Another notation concerns shiela-na-gigs, gargoyle-like carvings which appear on churches in England and Ireland, grotesques charged with scaring away evil spirits. One of the women says that in Australia, a sheila is a whore; another says that Australian women have set about reclaiming the name. I note, too, that the salmon is a transformation symbol of immortality and wisdom which predates the serpent. I accept all of this as information. I do not have a cognitive map of spirituality into which I can fit these bits and pieces. I recognize a good story though, so I record the tale that Maureen tells:

> *In Northern Ireland, near Ulster, in times long past, Macha, a clever and beautiful woman took pity on a grieving widower, climbing into his bed, tending his hearth and four children. They lived together in happiness until the man proposed to leave her, for a brief time, to attend the gathering of the clans. Even though Macha was great with child, he would not be dissuaded, he would go. She warned him: "Do not speak of me to anyone at the gathering. If you do I will no longer be able to stay with you." He reassured her that he could keep their secret, and so he did until the last night of the gathering when, under*

> *the influence of too much mead, he boasted of his gifted wife. "So strong and swift is she," he said, "that she can outrun the King's finest horse." The King demanded that the wife be brought to test the husband's claim. When she appeared before him, the King demanded that she race against the horse of his choosing or he would take her husband's life. She begged to be excused, surely her pregnancy was reason not to run, but the King insisted. She appealed to the men of Ulster, asking that they intercede, but they greeted her request with rude gestures and laughter. So she raced against the king's stallion and won, then immediately went into labour, giving birth to twins. Still bloody from birth, she turned to the men of Ulster cursing them: "You will suffer the same pain and weakness for five days and four nights whenever you most need your strength. You, your sons, and your sons' sons until the ninth generation." Then, cradling her newborns, she walked away and was never heard of again.*

Sophia comments that Maureen's telling is a story of the time when the Goddess fell into disfavor. Other stories in which a goddess is raped or dies in childbirth may also be taken as allegorical references to the deepening of patriarchy.

Time for a refreshment break. I seek Sophia out, telling her that I may want to write about the afternoon's proceedings for a university assignment, asking if that might be a problem. She tells me that anything that she or Maureen says can be recorded, but I must not write about any of the other women without their permission. She requests a copy of my writing, and I promise she shall have one.

We return to our places once again, and the storytelling continues. We now learn about Brighid, the Christian saint. Again, Maureen is the teller:

> *In olden times, an Irish nobleman, though married to a woman of his own class, loves one of his slaves who conceives his child. A Druid prophesies that the child will be a daughter of great beauty and wisdom. Not to be outdone, two Scottish bishops also prophesy that the girl will be a "flaming inspiration." The nobleman's wife, jealous of all the attention the slave woman*

> *and her expected child are generating, asks her husband to send the slave away. He complies, selling the hapless woman to a Druid. Some months pass, then one day, as the woman returns from milking, she gives birth as she steps across the threshold.* (Aha!) *Three men come and baptise the child with milk. The child Brighid learns the religion of the land from her Druid stepfather, and the new religion of peace and compassion from her Christian mother. In time, she returns to the household of her birth father who wants her to marry a neighbouring nobleman, in spite of her wishes to become a nun. The father takes her to the house of the intended bridegroom, leaving her outside in a chariot, while he goes in to arrange the marriage. While he is gone, Brighid gives her father's jewelled sword and scabbard to a poor leper who happens by. When the two noblemen come out and hear what she has done, her intended rejects Brighid saying to her father: "If she is so careless with your wealth, what might she do to mine?" Her father then allows her to join a community of women where she is soon chosen to become the Abbess. A bishop comes to ordain her, but the words that come out of his mouth are the words used to ordain a bishop. He sets aside the challenge that he has spoken wrongly. His words, he believes, are truly the "words of the Spirit," so Brighid becomes a bishop, and later an abbess too.*

The afternoon is drawing to a close, but we have enough time to partake of the *gifts of the Goddess*—bread, salmon, and milk. Small china plates are passed round. A pot of butter, another of cream cheese, and yet another of salmon spread are circled. The platter of quick bread is taken from the altar and circulated; we serve ourselves, breaking off chunks. Maureen pours milk from a pitcher into our styrofoam cups. We feast.

When finished eating we stand, push our chairs back, and prepare to learn the dance which will used in the closing ritual. Maureen instructs. We number off around the circle: *One, two, one, two, one, two ....* *Ones* and *twos* face each other, *ones* move to the right, *twos* move to the left as we practice weaving in and out, around one another, listening for a change in the taped music when we will reverse direction; then we listen for another music change which will signal us to go to the altar and pick up a candle. Two dry runs later, we almost have the dance mastered. Maureen starts the music again and we begin to weave round the circle, waiting for the musical shift that will give us permission to claim a candle. All afternoon I've been casting a covetous eye on two candles which stand out from the others—one a smallish orange pillar candle which seems to have a coarsely woven fabric embedded in its surface, the other, a tea candle which has been set in a birch branch holder. If I have the opportunity, I decide, I will reach for one of these prizes. The music plays on, we continue circling. I smile inwardly, and, I suspect, outwardly. I feel a little like a child playing musical chairs. The musical cue we've been waiting for comes at last, women move toward the altar. I am well back. So much for my bold plan to reach for what I want. When I finally approach, only two candles remain—the one in the birch, the other—my own—still hidden in the little gift bag. I pick up both, offering the bag to the only woman who is empty-handed. We all move back into the circle to complete the dance, but our careful numbering has been lost in the move to the altar. We don't improvise well, so with some laughter, we give up on our rehearsed dance and settle for walking around the circle, all in the same direction, until the music stops. Sophia and Maureen offer blessings which I assume cover us and our candles. We stand in silence for a moment, perhaps reluctant to let go of the experience. Finally, the circle breaks. Women reach for coats and purses. I ask a couple of women for their phone numbers, then I slip away. The next morning, I soak my reeds, and weave a Brighid cross which I set with my birch ensconced candle on my kitchen table to mark the day. I resist the impulse to make Irish Soda Bread.

After Words

There was more to the ethnographic exercise than describing the Candlemas event. I was asked to "assess the insight and information that (my) own participation (lent) to the case, which would not have been available from other techniques (e.g. purely visual observation, structured interviews, etc)."[3] I was also asked to specify how my status as a participant might have affected my status as an observer. In answer I wrote:

> *It has been said that an ethnography provides a snapshot of people, place, and circumstance at a given time. If this be true, the foregoing account falls short, for it is a line drawing, not a photograph. I've presented a recognizable sketch of Sophia's Circle, which met on January 30, 1998, but it is far from fully representational. Still, my, more-than-skeletal, less-than-fully-fleshed, telling is enough to give some sense of what it was like to attend this particular women's gathering. Because I participated in the afternoon's events, I am able to share a first person singular immediacy which would not have been possible had I relied on interviews or observation only to tell the Circle's story.*
>
> *If I had chosen to sit apart from the activities, diligently making notes all afternoon, acting only as observer, I suspect a different picture of Sophia's Circle would have emerged. Undistracted by the demands of participation—the need to learn the song, the dance, the craft—I might have moved too quickly to an analysis or, worse yet, a judgment of what I was seeing. By only observing, by creating a "me—them" separation, I might well have become "objectively scientific," trying, prematurely, to place the afternoon's elements and activities into coded categories; alternatively, I might have paid more heed to the amused inner voice which whispered, now and then: "Oh goody! Witches and Goddess games!" As it was my intent to respectfully document the activities of the women, myself included, attending a Circle meeting, being a participant observer served me better than acting as an underskilled social scientist or a goodnatured, but somewhat cynical, commentator.*
>
> *In documenting Circle activities, I resolved not to be an intrusive presence. If I had come only to observe and record, I think I might have subtly altered the afternoon's proceedings. As*

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[3] I am quoting the instructions given on the assignment sheet for my ethnography course.

women became aware that they were being watched, some might have grown self-conscious and uncomfortable, and, while I doubt their discomfort would have been deep enough to alter their participation, it may have affected their enjoyment of the activities. As it is, I feel confident my presence had little impact. I did not even draw attention to myself by taking notes; others took notes too. In fact, I later learned that one notetaker is a newspaper columnist. If she planned to write about the Circle, she did not disclose her intention. But then, I remained largely covert as well, although I did, ostensibly, ask Sophia for permission to write about the Circle. Had she said no, I would have respected her decision.

A potential benefit of participant observation, which might recommend it as a research practice over other methods, goes unrealized in my work. Uncertain of my audience and even less certain of my spiritual path, I chose not to become fully confessional. I kept my own counsel regarding my motivations for attending the Circle and volunteered little of my "felt" experience of participating. I justify my decision arguing that I have no way of knowing whether my reasons and reactions are in any way representative of Circle participants. Given my decision, I especially regret that I did not have the opportunity to interview the women attending the Circle asking: "Why have you come? How do you benefit by attending? What do you take from the experience?" Their answers would have enriched my presentation, and perhaps encouraged me to provide answers of my own. The afternoon's agenda left little time for sideline conversation, however, let alone interviews, informal or otherwise.

In fact, the fullness of the afternoon provided many challenges for a neophyte ethnographer. I opted to participate more than observe, a choice which satisfied Shaw the seeker, but confounded Shaw the student. My field notes are a joke! I did not do justice to the "intellectual" aspects of the afternoon's proceedings: I failed to record Sophia's teachings regarding the early history of the Catholic Church or what she said about the old stories and stone carvings which tell us something of the prehistorical spiritualities of the land. I have nothing written regarding group interaction, perhaps because I tended to focus inwardly with the intention of using self as a sensing and monitoring instrument, which makes my decision not to fully report my experiences a tad ironic. I recorded the obvious, gave up on nuance; I was just too busy to do anything more.

Still, as demanding as participant observation is, it makes for engaging description. I hope my narrative has been full enough to allow a reader to "see" Sophia's Circle as well as place it in its own

> *evolving historical context.*[4] *My involvement with the Circle over time enables me to speak of past meetings. Had the Brighid workshop been my first Sophia's Circle experience, I might have come away believing the women met only to perpetuate some kind of Celtic spirituality—a mistaken notion, an example of the dangers of one-shot ethnography.*
>
> *Although our field assignment provided me an excellent opportunity to describe and document one meeting of Sophia's Circle, it did little to help me understand the Circle's continuing appeal. To learn why women choose to make the Circle part of their lives, even for an afternoon, I would need to extend the exercise by conducting interviews. Giving many women the opportunity to speak of their Circle experiences and of their broader sense of spirituality would satisfy both my natural and academic curiosity. Participant observation alone did not.*
>
> *In closing, I try to assess my strengths and weaknesses as a participant observer who may want to do further ethnographic work in Sophia's Circle. First, a strength: I authentically fit in. I am the right age, I walk the walk, talk the talk, and even dress the dress. I think other women would talk to me about their experiences because of our similarities. Second, depending on one's point of view, a weakness or a strength: I would not just drop into the Circle thinking, "here's something interesting to study," I would choose to study the Circle because it is an expression of a kind of spirituality that may help me solve some of my life's puzzles. Yes, that puts my objectivity in question, but if I make my own process explicit, my very subjectivity is rendered available for study. Lastly, a weakness: I would need to overcome my reticence, openly reporting my perceptions and thoughts, if I wanted to become one of my own key informants. Using the self as a measuring instrument becomes problematic if the self isn't comfortable with being confessional. Mea culpa!*

In retrospect, I consider some of the tensions I experienced in writing my evaluation of my ethnographic experience. Then I felt caught between cynicism regarding scientific objectivity and doubts about rendering my own subjectivity for investigation. I was both drawn to and repelled by "confessional" writing. When I wrote my proposal for an ethnographic study of Sophia's Circle, I was truthful, but cautious, in giving my point of view as a social science investigator:

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[4] In another part of the paper I provided some of the Circle's history.

> *I acknowledge that I bring cultural and religious "baggage" to my research. I note by way of explanation that I received my religious education in the United Church of Canada, in the 1950s and 1960s. My experience was more social than spiritual and definitely "middle of the road." I stopped attending church in my late teens because the practice seemed irrelevant, but in mid-life returned briefly to the United Church when, unexpectedly, "the spirit quickened." Frustrated by familiar, yet still unsatisfying, church practices, I sought spiritual sustenance in books which taught existential philosophy, self-actualizing psychology and New Age physics. I claim no religious "home," but find myself closely aligned with the liberal faith of the Unitarian Universalists and their toleration of religious ideas.*
>
> *I further acknowledge that I am broadly feminist in the sense Eller suggests. I believe "that the general state of gender roles in society.... are unsatisfactory and need to be changed" (1993, p. 7). At the core of my feminist belief system is the insistence that women and women's concerns are important which motivates me to record the stories of women who have moved outside mainstream religion in an effort to find a sense of meaning in their lives...*
>
> *I make little claim to objectivity in the work I propose, but I do believe, with Unitarian Universalist David Rankin, that "all religions in every age and culture, possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening."*[5] *It is my intent to listen carefully and report accurately what might be of value.*

I did act on my intent and the following stories resulted. They are reports of what is valuable—the lives of Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah. I listened to them carefully.

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[5] Quotation taken from a leaflet entitled *What do Unitarian Universalists believe?* published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, MA.

two women
eye to eye
measuring each other's spirit
each other's
limitless desire
a whole new poetry beginning here

Adrienne Rich
(Christ, 1986, p. 7)

Sophia

Goddess woman dreams nature
declares her spirit
struggling to breathe new living

In the two years since I first met Sophia, at one of her Circles, we have become somewhat more than acquaintances, somewhat less than friends. We do not meet socially. We visit briefly before and after Circles; occasionally talk on the phone about her work and my research; and we have read each others published words.[1] Last summer, I sought her advice when trying to make a spirit-guided decision regarding whether to move forward with plans to research woman-centred spirituality. In consequence, she knows some of my story, and I know a bit of hers.

I know, for example, that she is a lay theologian who holds a joint Master of Arts degree from two schools of theology in California, that she works part-time as a social worker in the mental health field, and that she has taught spirituality classes for Roman Catholic and United Church colleges. I know too, that she is unmarried, and that, in the past few years, she has become an entrepreneur, offering spiritual support to people who find themselves "seeking at the edges of tradition."[2] She hopes one day to make a good part of her living as a spiritual director, creator of rituals, and leader of Sophia's Circles. Her nascent work is rooted in a call to lead, a call she felt first within her Roman Catholic faith tradition. Last fall, in an article for a national Catholic newspaper, she wrote of being sent forth on a journey which has taken her beyond the boundaries of gospel-defined Catholicism into the incertitude of undefined borderlands. She wondered then, in print, how her "call to love goodness might take shape in a new world." I wondered too, and hoped to learn more when we came together for the first of our planned interviews.

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[1] I found her words, a poem, in a feminist spirituality journal. She found mine in an anthology of women's writing.

[2] Quotation taken from a leaflet advertising Sophia's services.

We meet one early afternoon in January, take some time to exchange pleasantries and brew some herbal tea before settling into the Priory's sunroom. Sophia chooses a bergamot candle from my small selection, which I light to mark the occasion. As she tucks her long legs beneath her, curling up in the sturdy armchair opposite me, I am reminded that she is slight, and quite tall, perhaps 5'8". As we prepare for her telling, I anticipate describing her—shoulder-length hair, brunette; eyes, blue; skin, fair; sweater and slacks, tan; droplet earrings, amber. Her look is natural; she wears little or no makeup. The lines around her generous mouth speak of her age, 41. In response to my suggestion that she bring items which might help her *tell her story*, she comes with a written list of memory prompts, a clear glass jar filled with dried rose petals, a framed pastel drawing, and several bound journals. Asked if she is comfortable carrying the day's conversation, she says "sure," however, she requests that I first review the question I had forewarned her I would ask: "Who are you?"

We both laugh at the query, acknowledging its deceptive simplicity. Sophia begins her telling considering an answer.

Who am I?
I found that a very baffling question
I wasn't quite sure what you meant by *Who are you?*
do you mean the labels I would attach to myself
the beliefs systems I follow
you said something about what would your friends say about ...

I guess the first thing I would say
this is really essential to my identity
I am a woman
I think that is really basic
and I guess I'm a risk-taking woman
I think I have a vision
I have a vision
I have a strong sort of passion that I live by
to move toward that vision
yeah, I guess as part of all that
I am a person of faith
it may not be a faith in institutions per se
it's faith in something greater than what is seen
I've always had that
from a very early age
I've always recognized that there is something out there
some force
I try to listen for it
and follow it
I also am human
and have a history that has wounds in it
and questions and unfinished pages
and aspects that are still unknown and growing
I know there are certain aspects of who I am that are shaped by that
touched by that
in a way they've been a blessing
but they've also created needs in me
areas where I don't feel strong
I guess that is what I can say about who I am

so I've kind of made notes about five different
four or five you said
and I have six
it was very hard to kind of put this down
sort of keep it to that number of places in my life
that were spiritual turning points
important in my journey

I guess the first thing to say is that I grew up on a farm
that had a profound effect on me
I used to spend a lot of time alone in nature as a child
for various reasons, I was alone a lot
even though there were five of us kids
I liked my own company
I would go off into the fields or into the woods
just spend a lot of time alone
I was fascinated by things religious and spiritual
as a teenager, I'm not sure when exactly
I remember taking a walk one night into the field
I used to often go on night walks
night walks before bed
I remember taking a walk into the fields one night
there was a mist rising from this one part of the field
which was part marsh, part slough
it was a summer night, warm
I just remember having this feeling of ...
well, I called it then, God
somehow that was the sacred
I just really knew it
that sense of the divine
now I'd always been walking in those places and feeling something
but I think that was the first time that I put a name on it
or identified oh, *this is what it means, this is what spirit is*
I just felt it very palpable, very raw
so I guess what I want to say is
nature has been always a part of the fabric of my spirit
my prayer
my spirituality

the next time that I had an important encounter with the sacred
I was at a particularly low point in my life
after high school
I was very confused for a whole bunch of reasons
the summer before Grade 12

I had gone away on my own for the first time
worked for the summer
it had been a summer of new and sometimes troubling experiences
I realize now, looking back
I was very depressed, the whole year of Grade 12
very confused about my life
before that I was very certain
o h, this is what I am going to do
I was very much in control, you know
my plan was laid out
I was actually planning to be a journalist
'cause I had done some creative writing
but anyway, I ...
that didn't work out
I actually did a work experience in Grade 12
in a local town newspaper
I helped produce this anniversary issue for the town
their seventy-five year birthday or something
that was my job
I did a really good job
I wrote all these historical articles which were good
some of them were just sort of articles about local businesses
there was just something empty in me about it
it wasn't the kind of writing I had envisioned myself doing
it came to me in that year
that wasn't really what I wanted to do
I didn't just want to write for some newspaper about anything
I wanted to write something with meaning
that was disillusioning
I kind of went through a couple of years of just searching
I worked as a secretary for a year
a receptionist for another year
I was just kind of confused
I lived in Edmonton
I moved to Edmonton
coming from the country, of course
the city was this big strange place
I quit walking at night because of the city
it wasn't safe
or it didn't feel safe
a lot of things changed
I felt very alienated, very far from God
I was kind of involved in some things
I was searching

I was in this little prayer group
the nuns had this little prayer circle
for young women who were searching
they didn't call it like *do you want to be a nun?*
but there was sort of that, you know
come to our house for tea and we'll have prayers
and they were experimental
anyways, I had some friends
I had some connections
I was looking and looking
this friend in the circle said
you know, there's this retreat this weekend
it was being put on by *Faith and Sharing*
a branch of the L'Arche family
I don't know if you've heard of the L' Arche movement
with Jean Vanier
he's the man who kind of started that whole movement
for people who live together in community
with people who have a handicap
anyway, so this retreat
they have these annual retreats
they had it at Star of the North[1]
there were people from the L' Arche community
all kinds of people
eighty people, it was a big retreat
Terry Gallagher
who was a missionary at the time in the Philippines
a very passionate speaker, so passionate
he preached this retreat
it was very powerful
I realize now looking back on it
he used a lot of images that he had gained
from being in the indigenous culture of the Philippines
to sort of open up people
the first night of the retreat
he said to us
I want you all to pray
to make a prayer for what you want out of this weekend
ask for want you want this weekend to be
I didn't even think about it
it was just automatic
the words just came out of, well

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[1] A Catholic retreat centre in St. Albert.

came through me
overwhelm me with your love
that was just straight from my depths
I hadn't planned or thought about it
it's like
this is what I need
you'd better show up or I'm checking out of here
so that's what happened
I guess I began to feel connected to people that weekend
I hadn't always felt connected to people in my life
I realize that now
until that weekend
and it just happened
this particular community
through them
there was a great deal of love shared
I mean I had all kinds of pain that I was crying about
things were coming out all weekend
people were just freely there, you know
hugging me
befriending me
listening to me
it was a very profound experience
at that age too
it's funny, I was going to bring you some kind of symbol
I didn't bring one because ...
I couldn't remember what it had looked like
but what came to me
was a cross
that was the symbol I associated with that weekend
it was a positive symbol
an important insight

the next key time that sort of leapt out
there's a number of years in between there
was the time when I went to study theology in the States
particularly when I was writing my thesis
I wrote a thesis called *God is female*
lover
friend
sister
mother
the process of writing that thesis was quite a passage of spirit
I was dealing with a number of issues writing it

people say *when you write a thesis you really write your life*
what your major issues are in life
and it's true
so I was really coming to terms with ...
with my image of God and myself as a woman
how sexuality played into that
did sexuality play into that?
coming to terms with my own sexuality
coming to terms with being a woman
how could I relate to God as a woman?
I didn't feel comfortable with the idea of *feminine*
the feminine had these stereotypes attached to it, I felt
but I thought there was some real power in the idea of female
the idea of sexuality as being a basis or a metaphor
about God
that could be birth
could be lovemaking
could be ...
women's way of being in friendship
you know
women's experience
it could be the notion of sister
sister and sisterhood
so I was kind of trying to look at women's experience of their sexuality
how it was expressed in different realms
how that can relate to God
anyway, of course
I had lots of stuff coming up as I was writing this
lots of anger about the patriarchal church
and, I, you know, kind of
my initial draft of my thesis was
had all that kind of brokenness as part of it
and, anyways, in the year that I was writing
I guess
I handed in my first draft
December 1
and my advisor
I had all kinds of problems with getting an advisor
I wanted a
preferred a woman
anyways
that raised issues for one of the women who was involved
raised lots of issues for her
that was a shock to me

then it raised issues for this man who was my so-called advisor
who was a fairly liberal priest
and I thought would be really open to all this stuff
he was very attached to *father*
God as father
and had a real hard time with this
he was very fair in everything else
but that image of God was just his central image
and I had no idea
so, anyway, the long and short of it is
my stuff triggered his stuff
and his stuff triggered my stuff
and there was a complete explosion
and it was probably the first time in my life
that I really looked the possibility of a failure in the eye
like there was that real possibility
he made a big scene
in his office, or not his office
outside his office
he made statements like
this is the worst piece of research I've ever seen in all my thirty years here
just blanket statements
I am a straight A student
keep that in mind
yeah, I was saying some things
that were stretching and pushing at the boundaries
and some of them weren't
maybe, as well researched as they could
but still, I mean
it was really out of proportion
you know
the reaction
the woman who was sort of also acting as an advisor to me
initially had been very supportive of the thesis
I had kind of been going to her mostly
talking to her about the content
explaining that *I really want to focus on female sexuality*
she was like, you know
I really support that
but when this happened
she was very nonsupportive.
very, I think, frightened
and she just turned against me
so, then I had a third advisor, bless her

a Unitarian minister
a midwife in her former life
an incredible experience, working with her
she was the second reader
I had to deal with the first reader and the third reader
she basically helped me deal with them
she used the image of the midwife a lot
and pregnancy, and birth
it was very helpful to understand
what I was going through, in those terms
during that time I lived on the west coast of the United States
they had flower vendors on the corner
there was one at the end of my street
every week I would go down
when I was writing my thesis
and buy myself a rose
that was my honoring of the week
a way to put my blood, sweat and tears
into something beautiful and lasting
and remind me that I was moving forward
so this is my jar of roses
they still smell nice
one of the symbols
the other symbol that comes to mind is the ocean
because when that happened
when I got this word that basically everything was on hold
and it was all in question whether I could proceed
I went to this cabin, loaned by a friend through the Franciscans
the only cabin on the California coast that's not owned by the state
it was owned by this old lady who was very Franciscan
she had little statues of Francis everywhere
she fed all the cats on the beach
I stayed there for about a week
looking into the eye of failure
the other thing I was able to claim that week
with the ocean's help
was my rage
my rage at the system
it was so healing to be there
to this day if I need a calm space
or safe place to go in my mind
that's where I go
I guess too
it's the place where I started to get in touch

claiming or acknowledging
that *yes, I have anger in me*
and it wasn't just about the system
it was about all kinds of things
like I was finally letting it out
saying *yeah, this is part of who I am*
so those are my two symbols
I did, obviously, make it through
I'm kind of amazed, now looking back
that I just basically walked in and
well, I made an appointment with him
and said *look, there is no one else I can work with*
he wasn't totally uncomfortable with what I was doing
he had read a feminist theologian
a process theologian
who he actually suggested I should read
who had some similar ideas
she's very solid
I did actually build my thesis around her arguments
or started with her arguments
so he was trying to be helpful
I think he felt really out of his depth
as a man, helping me with this topic
the problem was in our faculty
there were, I think, two women on faculty
out of fifteen or twenty faculty
one I had as the third reader
but she was very frightened
unsure of herself in the academic system
when this conflict came up
she just basically flipped sides
the other woman
who was sort of identified as the feminist theologian on faculty
had a reputation
well, I'm not sure of all the reasons
she had some real health problems
she had a reputation
very judgmental
most women students avoided her
she was known to be very aggressive
very aggressive person
so he said
why don't you work with this woman
I said, *I can't work with her*

no one can work with her
of course he knew that
so he said *OK, I will work with you then*
he had emphysema
he's dead now, bless his soul
he suffered from chronic emphysema
a real chain smoker all his life
he got pneumonia in the January of the year
I was writing my thesis
he was sick
he really couldn't do any work
I would leave chapters in his box
I would leave a note
let me know what you think
I'd maybe get a note back in three weeks saying
I got your chapter, keep sending them
or something
or *that looks good* or whatever
but it would take ages
I guess what was the saving grace
I really learned this doing the thesis
I needed a community to do this thesis
after the initial rejection of the topic
I took it to a friend
a co-student
an honours student
a candidate for the Ph.D. History program at Berkeley
an honours student in Theology as well
so I took it to her and I said
what do you think?
and she said
it looks like a first draft thesis to me
this looks pretty typical
she said
you've got really three or four theses here
you really need to chose one
focus on it
narrow your topic
this looks like a normal first draft
I don't know why they had such a reaction
it's kind of rough
all these new ideas
experimental
that's normal

and I go *thank you*
and then, I had another friend
who'd actually worked as an editor
with a publisher down there
also doing her Ph.D. in preaching and ministry
she offered to read my chapters and be my editor
'cause I really didn't trust my words
that was great
anyway, the thesis did get done
I didn't pass with honors
that would have been losing face on their part
right
I mean I can say that
my second reader recommended it with honors
it was funny
I think, actually, my first reader
he was quite pleased by it all
when we had the thesis examination
I had to fly back to the States
I was already back in Canada
working for a few months before we could schedule it
at the end of the exam
they asked me a few questions and had a discussion
pretty low key
they asked some good questions actually
all of a sudden, just spontaneously
my first reader just got up and started clapping
then everybody else got up and started clapping
I asked my second reader after that
had that ever happened before?
like *what was that?*
she said, *I've never seen that happen*
anyways
I guess, you know
that was memorable to me
that I made it through that
learned a great deal doing that writing
so anyway, that was that

the next thing I want to share
is relatively simple really
it was in June of 90
I had this dream
this is the beginning of where I really started growing

a spiritual life
roots were starting to move
toward the Goddess as a metaphor
an expression of my spirit
it was underground at this point
very cautious
I was still very cautious about this
even though I was talking about feminist theology
as I was teaching
I was teaching at that time
I didn't use the word *Goddess*
So, this dream
I'll just read it out to you
I am being shown the origins of my body
the shape and dimensions of it
the source of the gift
I am given to understand
how free and how beautiful is this body of mine
I am reassured how precious it is
I am being shown the future and the choices
how my body is related to various animals
I see the dimensions of my torso, my arms
it's as if I am explained the why for each part of me
the planning, the thinking
I can alter it then if I want to
but, I am as beautiful as the Goddess
my higher power wants me to understand this
my mysterious source
certain polishes and finishes are being prepared for me
muscle tone etc.
it was up to me
it was up to me
to say yes or to say no
God had designed a setting
a field
where all the best changes were allowed
freely allowed and encouraged
after that dream
I drew the dream
and that's what I brought
I call this *Wisdom's Garden*[2]

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[2] Wisdom's Garden is the name of the framed pastel drawing Sophia brought with her.

I guess what that was
I was starting to get in touch
in Christianity
there's this tradition called the wisdom tradition
in scripture
I was starting to really delve into that
learn about it
it connected to early Goddess tradition
in the Mediterranean culture
Isis, Ishtar were goddesses of wisdom
that's how they are known in the ancient world
the Hebrews in the Diaspora
when they were dispersed
they ran into a lot of goddesses
particularly the goddess of wisdom
they had to counter it
because lots of women were going to worship
some of the wisdom goddesses of the older culture
as well as some of the other goddesses of the older culture
so they came up with Lady Wisdom or Sophia
that's her name
it's a Greek name
it means wisdom
she's an image of God
sort of his earthly embodiment
there was a strain in early Christianity
that identified Jesus with the earlier wisdom figure
anyway, I was starting to explore the Goddess
at that space, at that source, by then
but it was only coming up through my dreams
it wasn't too public
so that's the next little item I had

the next thing that happened
the next, I guess, important point
I guess it was 1992, something like that
I moved to Edmonton in about 1991 or '92
I had been living in Canmore before that
after I came back from California
I really hadn't lived in Edmonton for about fifteen years
I didn't know anybody anymore
my family, well, they had their own lives
different things were happening with different ones
some of them lived here and some of them didn't anymore

I just found when I came back here
that I felt very disconnected for quite awhile
I missed my friends from school
the learning community I had been a part of
especially the other women
I was also dealing with some issues from my past
I was grieving
I stayed working
I coped but it was very difficult
I was working
and I still do, part-time, in Mental Health
I went to counselling
worked some things through
after about, I don't know
maybe a year of counselling
maybe six months of counselling
I guess it was about a year of counselling
I had some important dreams about my healing
and how to forward my healing
I'll just, maybe, read those for you
I have one of them here
only it's in edited form
I couldn't dig out my journal
I couldn't put my finger on the journal where the original dream was
these happened on the same night
May 14, 1993
I am encouraging people
to befriend, begrieve, and believe nature
big fields of it
and they left
left out of fear
when I put those words in my journal I couldn't read it
it was like I couldn't figure out
was it *begrief?*
like it came out as
begrief
believe
befriend
I kept trying to write
the right word
anyways, afterwards
I realized that all three words were important
anyways
I pitched all the possibilities of nature and the wild

"Camp out together!"
I am in this big park and people are milling about
and I am on a soap box
pretty soon I am looking around
I am the only one left with nature
I feel a little ticked off
actually I feel a little picked
that's what I say
I feel a little picked
maybe I felt chosen too
anyway
inside a voice tells me to befriend her
nature
it's kind of like watching a TV screen inside
the same pitch I made earlier is coming across the screen inside
like I'm watching TV, but it's in myself
that's the first dream that I have
then the second dream
I am arguing with raging hags
that's what I called them in my dream
raging hags
could be me
some women whose anger about the patriarchal system had hardened
turned inwards towards themselves
or outward against others
they were women who were
I recognized them as religious
you know
as nuns
women who were academics
theologians or academics
involved in feminist things in the church
all of them are trying to tell me what I should do
want to control my responses
in the middle of this argument
friends hand me a poem etched in calligraphy
it just says the title
"into reincarnation: task of the next millennium"
I know my work is about the reconstruction of a woman's psyche
at first I think it is just my own psyche
but as I've moved forward I think
that it's a larger task that many people are sharing in
but anyway, the title was
"into reincarnation: task of next millennium"

these were very important dreams
I took the first dream literally and I went into nature
the next weekend, as soon as I could
I packed up my car
and I went and spent time at this ecological reserve
in the Hand Hills
which is in Central Alberta
it's funny how things like coincidences happen
I found out about the ecological reserves
because at my day job
one of the secretaries
was very interested in environmental causes
she had a poster from one of the ecological reserves
I thought *oh, I got to find out about this*
'cause when I had my dream it was like
I've got to go somewhere and be in nature
so I don't know how I happened upon it
it was easy to find
there weren't any bears around
so that was good
accommodations not too far away
so I just thought *OK, I'm going to go there*
so I just spent a couple of days
just laying on the hills
started to reconnect with earth
I really had been separated, living in the city
I mean I had some moments obviously
of connectedness with the ocean and different places
I had connected
I guess what I realized was
my healing lies with the earth
I need to go there
I just did it
I did that the rest of the summer
every two or three weekends
I just would go
sometimes I took longer times
sometimes I went with somebody else
not just by myself
but it started, I guess, for me
building an image of who the Goddess is for me
one that's rooted in my experience
at that point
I wasn't too attracted to the Goddess of mythology

looking back
I realized that's probably because
I knew even then
there was a patriarchal overlay on the Goddess traditions
the Roman ones
the Greek ones
that is probably why I didn't feel like that spoke to me
anyway, returning to the earth was sort of
I was starting to contextualize my own experience
around the feminine, the divine, the sacred
I kept doing this every year for a few years
and have been working on a book
it's about my experience at those places
some of the insights I had
how spirit and land are connected
so I'm not sure what else I can say about that
this is all leading toward a climax here
as I kind of discovered images in myself
I guess I started to be able to share them with other people

the next thing I brought with me
this a journal I took with me to Europe
in summer of, oh, 1997
I went to Europe
never been to Europe before
I had travelled to other places like Latin America
and that had a faith journey attached too
but I won't bring it up here today
but I hadn't really travelled to Europe
my motivation, my main motivation
was to go on pilgrimage
I chose to go mostly to sacred sites
I wanted to investigate family roots
my Dad's side of the family was Scottish
my Mom's side of the family was Austrian
I didn't get there
but they're both Celtic in their roots
in a sense
'cause Austria is where the ...
the Rhine is where the Celts originated
or the Danube, sorry, the Danube
that was a few thousand years ago
they travelled a lot since then
so I felt this real connection

of wanting to really visit the Celts and the Celtic sites
the indigenous sites in Britain and also in France
I visited Chartres Cathedral
I visited a number of stone circles in Britain
holy wells and places that had ambiguous histories and meanings
some Christian, lots of pre-Christian associations
that was very powerful experience
I had already started the Circle by then
but this really reinforced my vision
to keep moving in this direction
during that time I had a number of dreams
just too many to tell you
they were investigating the idea of coming home
and land as being home
here's one
there's quite a few parts of England called the moors
this came after a day, I think
spent on the moors
I was at a stone circle there
May 21st
there is actually a lot of struggle in these dreams
between male antagonists and myself
how do you say that
parts of me that are trying to take control of my life
and move towards the land
and reclaiming the land in my soul
and parts that are trying to keep me from that birthright
there's that struggle
I won't go into this dream completely
it is almost like a war
anyway, this is one of the places
well, it's not a place, it's in my dream
I just called it *moorland soul home*
it was one of the places that produced some struggle for me
funny, there was actually a dream about breakthrough
I can't remember where it is
yeah, a lot of exploration of different aspects of me
here's something
I went to this one well one day
it was in Cornwall
I had this dream I was in a ritual
a funny dream
here, OK
I am at midnight mass

Easter vigil
I watch as Jim Riley
an old neighbour from the farm days
makes his way into church with his two children
one his real daughter and one I don't recognize
'cause he only has one child
she comes alive
this little girl comes alive with the lighting of the Easter fire
so much so she wants to join the altar procession
Jim keeps her near
they join a pew beside me
closer to the aisle in the centre
this is a good sign, I think to myself
that Jim is healing
Jim
his wife left him
a long story
but, anyway
his wife left him that winter
really, this is about me
that some part of me is healing
that had felt rejection or abandonment
a woman who I do not know
carries a baby in her arms
sits down beside him
perhaps he has found a new partner
apart from this hopeful change
I am a little concerned for Ashley
knowing that she is not fully welcome in this place
as a divorced man's daughter
still the priests at the altar are kind
and do not reject her joy
this is a place of joy
I guess what I was feeling on this journey
is that there was a part of me
that was feeling very alienated from the church
at that point, in a sense
abandoned or rejected, you know
I had a stigma on me
because it was like I was a divorced
like a daughter of a divorced man
I wasn't a whole family anymore
divorce, of course, is outlawed
in the Catholic church

anyway, this is a picture[3]
she comes alive
I just kind of chose to draw what spoke to me
she comes alive with the lighting of the Easter vigil fire
so much so she wants to join in the procession
I guess in all these visits
and these places, sacred places
I was feeling a great deal of coming home and celebration
Easter vigil's kind of the high point of the year
it celebrates the return, I guess
the triumph of the light
it's a celebration of fire
based on old pagan practices
lighting the Easter fire
it has such power for me, I guess
lighting that fire and participating in that ritual
it's kind of the most joyous ritual of the year
very long and lots of alleluias
lots of symbols and incense
I was celebrating, in my spirit, coming home
at the very end of the trip
I had some very powerful dreams about an inner marriage
the dreams also talked about pleasure in many forms
taking pleasure
that was not something, in my life
that was honored or validated
certainly, in Christianity, there is a great suspicion about pleasure
so that was one of the main things I was learning
how to appreciate pleasure
other people's company
myself
the land
all kinds of things were giving me pleasure
hmm, now I can't find it
but anyway
the last dream I had was about an inner marriage
and the breakthrough
hmm
I can't find the one, hmm
I'll try and dig it out for later
anyway, it was an important dream

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[3] At this point in the telling, Sophia showed a picture she had drawn in her journal of the dream.

so I guess that is where I am today
it's interesting
I went to Europe in May of 1997
in February or January of '97
I had bronchitis for two months
really bad
I developed asthma out of it
it was a year that actually kind of went downhill
even though I went to Europe and had a really powerful experience
it was a powerful experience being there
I didn't have as much stamina or energy as I usually have
I found myself having to really conserve my strength
I hadn't yet been diagnosed with asthma
I was still recovering from this illness
this bout of bronchitis
then, that summer when I came back from Europe
I had new neighbours where I lived
you know how things happen sometimes
just bad luck
neighbours who were just really noisy
they partied all night
they watched TV all night
my bedroom was right beside their living room
I lost so much sleep that summer
I'm sure that kind of did more damage to my lungs
I had to move out by September
I had to move out 'cause nothing could be rectified
the landlords couldn't be roused at four in the morning
well, anyway
these just weren't quiet people
they didn't work
so I had to move out
actually I became kind of a pilgrim
it was a bad year
lots of sickness and upset and change
that fall I moved in with my brother and his family
which was actually a very good experience
I ended up being around when my niece was born
most of the pre-birth stuff was all done at home
the baby was born
twenty minutes later in hospital
that was really exciting
I was part of their family
that was really exciting

actually we really worked it out quite well
we have very common values
and common outlook on a lot of things
so it was a real privilege to live with them for four months
'cause I had never lived with the family or kids or anything
so it was a really good learning experience for me
anyways, then
at the end of December
I decided to move
I kind of got back on my feet
had the time to arrange to do a move
I moved where I am now
so that year was very turbulent
Europe was in there
I was trying to stay faithful to that vision
my health was starting to give up
that's what I felt like
oh my health's going
feeling like *I don't have enough breath*
feeling like *I can't breathe*
this was an important message to me
ultimately I know
that my challenge for the next couple of years
probably five years
is to try and be able to make a living from this work
for lots of reasons, but particularly for my health
'cause I learned that year that I am too scattered
my energies are too disparate
I really want to be able to focus them
I suppose if I was still in the institutional church
I'd be working in a retreat centre
or somewhere where I could just focus my energies
things would be a lot less stressful
I'd have a salary
it wouldn't be a great salary
but it would a living salary
I would have a structure
institutional support to do things
but that's not how it worked out
so I'm having to just go on a vision
and chutzpah
just my own guts
so anyway
that's where I am at today

yeah
that's my story
today
it could change next week

I just wanted to add, when I went to Europe
I mentioned that I went as a pilgrim
I travelled alone, deliberately
every place I went to
I quickly discovered that people
were still leaving offerings
still were practising the old ways
I began to do that too while I was there
in each place I would pray for certain things
usually I prayed for friends, healing for friends
I also prayed though for myself
for healing in relationship
that was something I wanted
I sought healing ...
didn't quite know what that meant
but just knew that I needed to pray for that
and somehow the Goddess could help me with that
it was something that needed
to be taken to a female side of the Spirit
I guess
anyways
that's all

Dorian

Star woman born into love
living Adjustment
braids circular energy

Saturday, February 13, 10 AM, I arrive at the Priory a half-hour before my scheduled appointment with Dorian. I take about twenty minutes to prepare the room, laying out the consent form and rearranging furniture. The plush circular accent rug helps define my interview space. At its centre, I place a low, round wicker table which barely accommodates the two tape recorders, two mikes, and four tapes I intend to use. Around the rug's periphery, I place three chairs—an armchair for Dorian, a table-matching wicker chair for Dorian's story objects, and a well-padded wooden rocker for me. I choose not to move the wicker plant stand and TV tray which usually border the rug, thinking they will prove useful as places to put our candle and mugs. I hope that Dorian will think the space intimate rather than crowded.

Room prepared, I sit to worry a bit while awaiting her arrival. I write down what little I know of Dorian from our preparatory phone conversations—*over thirty, single mom, twelve-year-old daughter.* I can't recall what she looked like when I met her at the the Candlemas Circle, nearly a year ago. I seem to remember that she was a little hesitant, back then, when asked if I could call regarding her St. Brighid's Day experience; however, I sensed no such reluctance when I asked her to become one of my storytellers. I hope I will be able to quickly set her at ease in this first interview, but the memory of Sophia's discomfort, despite our shared history, is fresh. I wonder whether the rapport I hope to establish with Dorian will be helped or hindered by the lack of a prior relationship. She responded warmly to my proposal, perhaps I will benefit by the halo effect.

Turns out, I might have. Dorian, a written aide-mémoire in hand, comes well-prepared to tell her story. I relax as she tells me she considers it "an honor and privilege" to be given such an opportunity, but acknowledges that she feels vulnerable in putting herself "out there," and directs my attention to the items which she has brought along to comfort her "in this process." The objects she has laid out on the wicker chair include a hand-sized, blue and white patterned cotton bear with embroidered features; a three inch long, shadowed blue, columnar crystal with a pyramidal top; a smaller, *shades of brown*, polished stone; a 4" by 6" framed picture of what I guess is a multicolored representation of the Goddess; and two Thoth tarot cards—Adjustment and the Star. The 3 3/4" by 5 1/2" cards hold my attention. Adjustment, rendered in blues and greens, features a masked figure holding a downward facing sword, standing in a diamond formed, in part, by a balance scale. The pans of the scale are labelled with the Greek letters alpha and omega. The Star, in muted shades of pink and blue, depicts another graceful figure amidst cups, crystals, stars, and butterflies. I am particularly interested in what Dorian might say about the tarot, because I, too, have experimented with it. We also seem to be of like-mind when it comes to candles. She has brought a white one in a wide-mouthed jar which we light along with the cinnamon and clove scented orange votive she chooses from my cache.

I make a few mental notes to add to my written ones later: Dorian's height? 5'6"; build, medium; eyes, brown; hair, short, styled, and auburn; long sleeved sweatshirt, deep rose; necklace, a sterling silver Goddess with full hips and raised arms. I note, too, the deep furrow which sometimes creases the skin between Dorian's eyebrows. "Not unlike my own," I think. I've been told it is a sign of intensity.[1]

Dorian declines one of the cookies the nuns have left for us, and asks for a cup of water. I trust her to lead into her stories in her own way.

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[1] When I meet with Dorian in June to go over transcripts she comments on my remark about the furrow and intensity saying: "I think it's more a sign of heredity ... I could be intense but ... I think it's a trait I inherited, unfortunately, from my Dad."

I've never really told my full story before
I've certainly reflected on my story
I am quite a reflective person
I think that there will be
some learnings in this process, discovery,
because I've never really told my full story before
I feel a bit vulnerable, because I am revealing myself
my story is quite sacred, dear to my heart
it's who I am
one's story is one's life spirit
there are some sad pieces to it
life kind of ebbs and flows
yes, there's some sad pieces to work through
but, by strengthening the spirit, we do come through it
I feel a bit vulnerable
so I brought some symbols with me to comfort me in this process
I find symbols quite comforting and connecting
maybe I'll talk a little bit about the symbols

the first little thing
the last thing that I picked up on the way out the door
is this little bear
I like him because he has a nice little smile on him
they're called pocket bears
this little bear was made by a really dear friend
not a woman of a lot of words
but says the right thing at the right time
you know how different friends
are just good for the soul in different ways
the little pocket bears were made during a time of grief in her life
her Mom had passed away and she made these little bears for everybody
as a symbol of comfort to share with others
I've certainly had my share of grief in the last year or so
so I have the little bear on my dresser
he's a real little comfort to look at

and, I brought this beautiful crystal
I love the colour
I don't think life is always clear
there's some cloudy moments
the crystal reflects that
through life's experience sometimes things do become clear
if we give them time
I like the symbol of the crystal because it's not completely clear
it's a symbolic reflection of what my experience is in life
I often have the crystal on the top of my tarot cards
just as a clearer for the cards

And this other little stone
I brought because I love the colours of it
it connects me to the earth
I thought, if I like
I will just pick it up and hold it, when I want to
because I just love the feel of it

then the two tarot symbols
in the tarot system that I work with
the Thoth deck
under the guidance of Angeles Arrien
all of us have lifetime symbols
from when we come into the world
my two are the Star and Adjustment
the Star is the personality symbol
a symbol of nature
it's funny, before I even knew the Star was my lifetime symbol
at a gathering of women
we were asked to pick a symbol of nature
that we related to
I, of course, chose the star
I said, because I thought it reflected a beautiful light
and it's always there
the stars are always there
as a constant companion
the Star means, in the tarot
the water bearer
the one that lets the emotions flow from heaven through to the earth
a person of some integrity and self worth
loving oneself no matter what your experience
so, for me, in terms of my spirituality
it's a good reminder of the core of who I am

which could be interpreted as a reflection of light
I find by going back to the honesty of my emotions
there is always a workable solution
no matter how difficult that is
the Star person can be described as having some natural charisma
someone that others can be attracted to or drawn to
I certainly think that's my experience
the Adjustment symbol
is a woman who wears a mask of vulnerability
which I spoke about in the beginning
the pillars are the four pillars of health
our emotional, our physical, our spiritual, and mental health
there's the alpha and the omega
the balancing our lives from beginning to end
I accept now that I will always struggle with balance
it is a card of some deep healing
often about a person who loves nature
I certainly love nature
and activities that draw nature in
I love hiking
I love water
I love beautiful days like this
I find it healing to be amongst trees
or any beautiful spot outdoors
it gives me a sense of rejuvenation and grounding
bringing me back to a sense of balance
Adjustment's sword
that's about your central grounding
being really grounded in yourself
so although you feel like things are off-balance
you can come back into balance
to ground within yourself

then the picture of the Goddess
I just got her around Christmas
I just love it
look at the head part
all these bright ideas
all this wonderful light coming out in the world
wonderful, wonderful
underneath the body there's lots going on
it comes out in extremely bright radiance
type of waves
a beautiful picture of the womb and the breasts

the womb is often about the cycles
we go through and how we cope with our life
the breasts are often about how we nurture ourselves
about how we nurture others
then the snake
often a symbol of transformation
she's got the tools
the snake in the one hand
the rootedness of the tree in the other
she's got the tools for growth
the tools for transformation
it's in her hands
tied to the universe
a number of spirals in here
a spiral goes out in the background
a tie from us to the larger part of the universe
I never really explained the card to anybody
or talked about why I love it so much
her body is even made of stones
parts of the earth put together
it's full of a lot of symbolism

of course, I am wearing this necklace
which is a symbol of the Goddess
which I like to hold, because, again
it feels really comforting to me
I noticed her body
the body on this necklace is somewhat like the one on the card
the fullness of the woman
comforting symbols to have ...

I thought I'd just start with where I began and move up from there

if I could choose four or five transition points in my life
it's hard to mark an exact time
to me, there was no exact time
but rather a time period when things gestate
then I come through
and realize I have gone through a form of transition
I like the idea of a life passage or a transition
issues or ideas will come to the surface for me
and guide me as to where I need to go next
life for me is a constant process of change
circular rather than linear

it's hard to pin down an exact period of time

I thought it might just help to say I was born January 13, 1956
grew up in a relatively small Ontario town
probably could be described as a fairly middle-class
Christian lifestyle
I grew up Presbyterian
that came from the paternal side of my family
some people think a Presbyterian is very rigid
that wasn't my experience
we had open discussions about religion
although we had family structure
I don't think we had a really rigid family structure
in my father's parents
certainly for my grandfather
there was somewhat of that sense of rigidity
my grandfather had fought in the war
probably was looking for some grounding after that
in life and in family, in some good things
my mother's side of the family
didn't really have a lot of involvement in the church
my maternal grandmother and my mother
and, interestingly
a couple of the women that my brothers have married
didn't really have much of a history
in terms of a Christian church or upbringing
although the women still had a strong sense of spirit
unfortunately, when I was getting into my thirties
and could have connected with my mother
more on a spiritual level
about her beliefs and values
connecting more to her historically
she died
so I think I've sometimes gotten
my sense of connection and valuation as a woman
through other women
it's been harder to get it within my own history
in my own family
anyway, we had a fairly stable
funloving kind of upbringing
there were six of us in the family
the church did have a very strong presence in our life
to me, it was home, it was OK
went to Sunday school

sang in the church choir
went to CGIT which is like Brownies and Guides
it was somewhat of a community
a family for me
growing up
my paternal grandfather dedicated
two beautiful stained glass windows to the church
one was *The Lord is My Shepherd*
the other was *Come Let The Children Come Unto Me*
I actually had both an aunt and an uncle pass away this year
who were like guardians to me
especially after losing my own parents
I realized especially in the last six months
through my upbringing
and through my increasing awareness as an adult
and going through the loss of relatives
how much children were valued in our home
I don't think that ever really occurred to me until just recently
I felt fortunate to be born into love
into nurturing
I work in social work
I can appreciate through my work
how many people don't feel that they were loved into the world
as just valuable little beings
how many people didn't have that
perhaps, that's one of the strengths I can share through my work
a sense of family and community
what that might look like for people

probably one of the first shifts for me
was when I was in Grade four
I'd be either eight or nine
my maternal grandmother died
in the tarot I've had all my lifetime symbols worked out
in the tarot the first time my soul card comes through
is that year
I felt very, very close to my maternal grandmother
she was good for my soul
with, well, four brothers
I often would go to my grandmother's home on weekends
like a little retreat
I could get away
I could just be by myself
I had this wonderful room

it was very quiet and peaceful
I got this individual attention
from my grandma and my grandpa
that was a loss
she'd gone in for a gall bladder operation
we never thought that she wouldn't make it through
it wasn't done well
I still remember my mother coming home
walking through the door
she would have only been probably in her thirties
I still remember the look on her face
then that first sense of the loss of connection to history
the loss of someone I felt very close to
that same sense of grief from my own mother
I remember just praying my little heart out
that my grandmother would come back
that first sense of injustice in the world
like *how could this happen to somebody we love*
how could they just be gone
I thought I was going to have this time with her again
the sense of sadness that it leaves people with
the grief that it leaves people with
I know at some point I stopped praying
but it probably went on for some time
that I prayed that she would come back
then I think what I must have done is talk to my mom
I don't remember for sure
but I must have talked to her
or somebody that helped me reconcile
that she was kind of with me
in my heart and my memory
but wouldn't be coming back
as much as one can understand that at that age
I came to some peace with myself around her as a memory
valuing the memories and gifts of who she was
which eased the pain of the loss in the physical sense
I think when you are growing up
you think God is a power outside of yourself
that this God should have any power that you want him to have
when that power doesn't work the way you think it should ...
that was probably my first experience trying to reconcile that

the next place I went to
in terms of transitions

was my early university years
between the ages of 19 to 22
so around 1975
there wasn't any dramatic event at that time
but a number of transitions
which led me to a different understanding
I had gone out to Halifax to go to university
it was really quite beautiful there
I went to a small university, St. Mary's
it was only about a mile from the ocean
near a beautiful park called Point Pleasant Park
beautiful evergreen trees
lots of paths, a nice beach and bay area
it was really quite pretty
I began to discover
some alternative possibilities in life
being exposed to more than just the Christian experience
I took all kinds of exploratory courses
knowing I wanted to go into social work
lots of exciting discussion
I had one friend, quite an interesting friend
she was an atheist, but seemed to have
a sense of spirituality about her
that was intriguing to me
exploring poetry
modern dance
getting a different sense of the body
and sexuality
and enjoying a different aspect of nature
being by the ocean
taking all that in
getting a different sense of Canadian history
being in the Maritimes
a different sense of the roots of Canada
a different sense of some of the Black and the French history
also some sense of prejudice, a sense of poverty
that whole time period speaks to a different kind of exposure
an overall, very exciting time of learning
I think a sense of developing
more of what is natural and right for me
in terms of my Star card and personality
I felt more freedom to explore
more in control of where I wanted to go with my life
it was like this big opening up of what is possible

and, of course
exploring relationships
a moving out of the nest

so then I went on from there
and went into social work
in terms of spirituality during that time
liking the holistic learning
congruent with humanist values
I have always felt that whatever I did
had to fit with who I was as a person
so I felt doing something that was interactive with people
fit my personality and my learning style
once I left home
I didn't regularly attend church or anything
did get married in the church
my husband at the time was Catholic and I was Presbyterian
in terms of the Catholic religion
it just really bothered me
the whole set up, the whole patriarchy of it all
before I even knew a lot about patriarchy
the whole part about one person being so close to God
and one person being able to interpret
what's right and wrong for everybody else
just really drove me crazy
now I think that I understand
that I probably married somebody like that
because I had to bump up against those values
I had a person in my life who was quite rigid
in terms of his beliefs
other Catholics are more open
it's how Spirit guides you, not how religion guides you
there's lots of soul in all of us
and it's how we let our souls guide us
we can use learnings or values from our religions
but we don't have to let those limit us
I remember developing a strong sense
that if I acted with integrity
if I did my best to let my intuition guide me
then I didn't need the structure of religion
to tell me what to do
I found books or music or other things
nurtured my spirituality more
as opposed to going to church

I guess I found after a while that as long as I followed
what had heart and meaning for me
I didn't need the church to tell me how to behave
there was some loss, the loss of community
that's probably the piece that I missed
that sense of community

the most drastic shift for me was in 1985
yeah, I think I was twenty-nine, it was in April
both my parents were killed in an accident
absolutely horrible
absolutely horrible for us
basically blew us out of the water
we're in recovery
will always be
when a family goes through an experience like that
there's a restructuring that goes on
a relearning about relationships
a renurturing of relationships
a renurturing of the spirit
it's probably more than 10 years of recovery
and will continue to be that throughout our lives
as we come to understand more and more
about how it affected us
that really shattered my beliefs
why would God take good people away
my Mom was educated as a teacher
taught special needs kids in schools, more as a volunteer
she had her own family work
an incredible person
she would canvas for the Cancer society
would knit things for Inuit children and send them up North
a good nurturer within our family
had a great spirit about her
I loved her laugh
how could we lose people like that
my dad
he was a volunteer hockey coach
part of the Optimists club
I can't remember all the different things he did
certainly as a father played a major role in our family
gave up things in his life
he made sure as we were children that he was available to us
both of them nurtured my spirit in different ways

so that was like having the rug totally pulled out
from under you in your life
a strong loss of connection to the roots of family
I just thought
why
this doesn't make sense
these good people
sent me into a crisis
in some ways I knew
our connectedness to a spirit or to God
comes from within
but I still had this over-riding sense
that somehow the power was out here, somewhere
that's what a lot of religions teach
it was like just being in this world of loss
I remember feeling some transition fairly immediately
it was in the time between when they died and the funeral
sorting out how you lose somebody physically
but spiritually you really carry them with you
in your heart and soul
that is always there
and nobody can ever take that
I remember going to this book
When Bad Things Happen to Good People[1]
I think it helped me look at the gifts of life
a bit
as opposed to the loss
that was probably how it helped me
somewhat
at that time
one of the most difficult passages of my life
even though it was a major loss
I can appreciate some of the foundations
the gifts, the learnings, and the strength
that one gets from strong family foundations
again, when one realizes that strength
that's what helps them pull through

one link through all of this
that had some meaning spiritually
was some form of prayer

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[1] Kushner, Harold. (1981). When bad things happen to good people. New York: Schocken Books.

some form of reading
absorbing different information
again music and nature
just trying to cope and live with the loss
of my parents, my family foundations
but within a year I was pregnant
looking forward to the birth of my daughter
so there was some connection to joy
something to look forward to
at the same time, not too long after that
I looked at my marriage and realized
that I couldn't stay in my marriage
so all of that was one of the most difficult times of my life
I was looking at the fact that those foundations
were going to need to change too
I was going to go through more loss
so that, I think, was partly what led me
to seek out women's spirituality
I needed to seek out something which gave me
a greater foundation, a greater sense of nurturing
a greater sense of getting back to my own soul
I think those experiences moved me away
from what my soul needed
exploring women's spirituality
was a way back to my soul
what I needed to do to look after the self
my daughter was born
a beautiful, beautiful blessing in my life
I've always been a bit of a natural nurturer
I just naturally felt comfortable as a mother
right away
I think partly because I grew up amongst a large family
had a sense of the mothering role
so my daughter was born
right away I had questions about how I would raise her
in terms of her spirituality
I kind of liked the possibility of having her baptised
I thought maybe we'd go back to the Presbyterian church
my husband, at the time
he was from Trinidad
he was from somewhat of a mixed race
some Chinese in his background
also a bit of African
his mom was from Grenada

he felt the Catholic church was more cosmopolitan
I think there's some truth in that
he thought it might be more comfortable for my daughter
being raised in the church that was more cosmopolitan
so we had her baptised Catholic
she has continued to go to the Catholic school
we're divorced now
if it was only me parenting her
I wouldn't necessarily feel that I had to bring her up
through the Church
however, because her Dad is involved
I thought, *OK, it's important to him*
and it's OK if she has some structure to start with
actually they're quite willing to let the kids debate in school
which is good
I, of course, give her different perspectives
but I don't want to confuse her at this point in her life
so I thought *OK, fine*
if she's raised within that structure
then that gives her something to work from

I started to work with the city
doing more community type social work in 1987
I think two things kind of coincided
when I started to work for the city
more feminist literature was coming out
interestingly enough, I had a male boss at the time
really good, good fellow
he encouraged me to start reading feminist literature
the city was really involved in the area of family violence and abuse
so he was encouraging me to read some of that information
that's actually how he met his wife
through their work
his wife educated him quite a bit
so it was quite an interesting time
in terms of working with other women and men
but particularly with women
a strong team of women
doing some reading
doing some exploring
going to these different conferences
that's when I went down to a women's spirituality conference
in Calgary
I think a number of us went from Edmonton

it was wonderful
this incredible energy of women
just incredible
the richness of the experience of being in the company of other women
all there to explore the concept of spirituality
different introductions into how one can explore spirituality
and explore their being as women
I really liked a lot of what I was hearing
all this information that I was taking in
breathing in
all this energy
I think somehow that parallels very closely
the kind of work I was doing
because as we began to bump up
against more difficult issues in our work
there needed to be a stronger sense
of grounding and direction as women
in terms of where we were going with some of the work
it fit
I was saying initially
I needed things to be congruent in my life
in terms of my work and myself generally
an exposure to women's spirituality at that time
was probably just what I needed

so then from there
I think in 1991
around the age of thirty-four, thirty-five
I took my first women's spirituality class
I remember for the first time in my life
feeling really safe
in a really good environment with other women
and a real sense that *it's safe here*
getting more of a sense of women's historical roots
coming to understand that Christianity
is just a certain period of time ...
that there were lots of learnings and lots of significant history
previous to that time
so beginning to see women in the larger context
in the continuum of history
also during that class
having an exposure to different tools that could be used in spirituality
how oracles could be used to support one's spirituality
the tarot

which I became very attracted to
using rune stones
using medicine cards
we learned a wonderful model for spirituality
if you're interested
the book *Dance of the Spirit*[2]
now it's actually written by a Christian women
but it's this wonderful model
I can't remember all the steps, but there is
awakening, discovering,
creating, transforming
I think there's a being stage
and then a doing stage
it's a wonderful model in terms of the spirit evolving
it was a time of gathering the strength of my own spirit
I knew I had to leave my marriage
my marriage pulled me away from trusting in myself
trusting my own spirit
trusting what I knew
taking that course was the beginning
of getting back to who I am and what I need
and then, of course
I saw a really good psychologist
for emotional support through that whole process
and did leave my marriage

in terms of the spiritual side of things
we really liked our class
so those of us that wanted to remain connected
began having monthly women's circles
a form to practice our spirituality in
that went on for about five or six years
there was a core group of about five or six of us
we left it open
other women could join
people moved in and out a little bit
I think we just considered it a sacred time
to get together and talk about what has meaning for us as women
during those times together
we would sometimes do some writing
we tried to have a theme

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[2] Harris, Maria. (1989). Dance of the spirit: The seven steps of women's spirituality. New York: Bantam Books.

but we would always cast the circle
we made this wonderful rope
made up of all different kinds of cloth that people brought
braiding all the women's lives together
we braided this big long rope
that we used to form our circle
one time a woman brought clay
we made sculptures of goddess figures
we would explore through different books
different themes that we would want to work with in our Circle
sometimes it depended on who was hosting it
eventually as our kids got older
it seemed to be getting more difficult
to meet formally on a monthly basis
so we meet more informally now
around the seasonal celebrations
I think that's OK
it's like there's an agreement
that we still have a commitment together
but it's kind of as it works out
I was actually going to have Candlemas
I still don't know if I am doing it tomorrow or not
I know we are a bit late
but I thought I would tie it
into the theme of Valentine's and relationships
initially a number of people thought they could come
now it's dwindled down to three or four
so I have to sort out if we're going to do that
so that has certainly been a big part of my life
now women's spirituality is absolutely of utmost importance
like breathing
a way to nurture the soul
a necessity
I think it's always been important to me in my life
but the tools that work for me now are clearer
what speaks to me
what I feel at home with
is clearer

I identified one last time
more recent time
probably about 1997 up until now
as my daughter has gotten older
it has freed me up to start exploring the tarot

I started going to tarot seminar classes
I almost see it as a women's spirit circle
I see the tarot as a tool for me
in terms of supporting and practising women's spirituality
a way to explore energy patterns
that move in and out of our lives
the cards can be used as a way to deepen one's understanding
as well as validate and guide one's experience
I always find it just as wonderful
to be amongst other women and to share stories
I think it's just almost like a tarot support group
a way to come together around a common interest
but I see it as only one form to practice spirituality
and then, of course, I've gone to Sophia's Circle
which I really like
because I find it very educational
I don't have time to do all the research into women's history
like, say the study of Brighid
so it was wonderful to go and get that rich information
that different historical sense
the symbolism and celebration of the Goddess
an opportunity to celebrate and be with other women
but the ritual part isn't as rich for me in her circles
as the ones that we've done in the smaller group
if I went more often perhaps that would shift

I had mentioned that this last couple of years
has just been incredible
shifts of energy going on
our whole work and department has restructured
and I have been moved around
my sense of having any power at work has all changed
so that has been one area of change
I've been in a fairly good nurturing relationship
with someone who really feels like a soulmate
but that is shifting and changing
I had some major losses
I had four people pass away within six months last year
the first was a really good friend's mother
actually my sister-in-law's mom
but my sister-in-law and I were friends since we were 13 years old
when you are a teenager their mother is like your second mom
my uncle
expected but not expected

then my aunt
totally unexpected
all from June through 'til November
and then my partner's dad
in early December
there's been some challenges, some growth
some shifts for me in the last couple of years
drawing someone into my life who has felt like a soulmate
has gotten me more in touch with what my own soul needs
going into a deeper level of understanding of the soul sources
leading one to trust one's own experience
it's funny, I knew
in the spring and summer
that I really needed some quiet soulful time in the fall
I knew I wanted to read the book *Care of the Soul*[3]
I felt my soul needed healing
through reading *Care of the Soul*
I began to think
how can I take care of my soul everyday
and another book
a book of Celtic wisdom of the soul
the *Anam Cara*[4]
a beautiful, beautiful book
about the energy of the soul
through these deaths of people
recently in my life
one of the things that I found
is that they all were able to pass away
in a sense of the spirit of love
almost passed away in the arms of love
in a good sense of comfort
in caring
reading this book the *Anam Cara*
when someone dies
sometimes the spirit or the soul
doesn't leave the body right away
the soul will stay around for a while
it stays as long as it needs to
I know the minister talked about when my uncle died
how when he walked into the room
he felt my uncle there

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[3] Moore, Thomas. (1992). Care of the soul. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
[4] O'Donohue, John. (1997). Anam cara: A book of celtic wisdom. New York: Cliff Street Books.

I thought it was just a beautiful concept
that we leave when we are ready
even though our body physically says it's time to go
that soulfully we go when we are ready
so it made me think about how my parents died
we had no time, no ability to leave them in love
I mean we had the funeral, but we were so full of grief
I mean certainly there were wonderful things said
but if one had had more preparation time
it would have been done in a different sort of way
I think we were all so shocked
we could barely get through it
so I was thinking that one of the things I might like to do is
recreate that for myself
I want to create a circle with some people
that are very close to me
and honor them in the way that feels better for me
when my uncle died I did go back for the funeral
but when my aunt died I didn't
it just was too much at the time
however I did work quite closely
with the minister from the Unitarian Church
I spent some time with him
on the day of the funeral
then I had a circle at my home
I had an honoring of her life
invited some close friends and did a circle
so I think where I am now
I want to look at using the sacredness of ritual
I think as I get older I'm learning more about
what forms of ritual work for me
what has meaning and significance for me
how I might create that in my own life

I see women-centred spirituality
as very validating and nurturing for me
I think that form of spirituality
gives women a real sense of connectedness to one another
for me and for what I know of other women
I think that has meaning for us
the different symbols of the goddess
the different archetypes of the goddesses
some of the rich history
reflects the different seasons in our lives

our different moods
our different ways of being
it's a way to validate and ground some of my experience in life
it's something that makes sense for me
it just fits
I can read things
and it's like I'm resonating with what I am reading
it just fits
one of the outcomes of women's spirituality may be
that women nurture their spirits in safe environments
which allows us to be open to the world in different ways
we probably all experience the spirit beyond the physical form
but it's whether we are willing to talk about it or not
how open people are to talk about it
I sometimes think things have a meaning beyond what we see
I really truly believe that a lot of women's literature
and more and more information on women's history and spirituality
who we are and where we are going
has come out in the last 15 years
before we go into the millennium
I think there must be a reason
that the world must need a different form
we must be meant to be coming into a different form of power
a different form of learning at this time

in terms of my story I think
I've pretty much said
what I need to at this point
of where I've been
and how I've come there

Shililyak

spiderline healing woman
offers sweet grass gifts
dances, drums, lives survival

In our first interview, Shililyah, an American Indian, tells me that she is of the spiderline, "in her teachings," those who were and are the shamans, the healers, the mystics. To symbolize the intersection of our stories, to our second interview, I bring my *Spider's Web*—a wall-hanging I pieced and quilted some years ago using cotton trapezoids and triangles in shades of marine blue, forest green, and desert brown. The hanging, sewn to replace an earlier patchwork *King's Cross*—my guiding symbol during the time I reconsidered Christianity—served as a declaration that my spiritual worldview was changing, that I was thinking in terms of inter-relatedness instead of hierarchies, of webs instead of ladders. It seems Shililyah has been thinking of webs as well. She brings me a gift in a brown paper lunch bag tied up with plum colored wool. "I used Indian wrapping paper," she jokes. I am delighted with the gilded spider's web lapel pin I find inside the bag. She tells me that she kept me in mind while she crafted the dreamcatcher with the tiny turquoise stone. Her gift, she says, is meant to strengthen me so that I will "have the courage to create change." I wonder what change she intuits I need to make. Once again, I am touched by her generosity. Shililyah has already given me a braid of sweet grass to invite kindness into my life as well as a sage smudge mixture which she instructed me to burn for cleansing and protection. The gift I offer in return is a lavender-scented candle made from beeswax.

The beeswax cylinder is the second candle I have given Shililyah. She confirms my almost certain memory—she is the woman who accepted my gift bag containing the small pink votive candle at last year's Candlemas gathering. Shililyah sat beside me that day, telling me that she was visiting

Sophia's gathering for the first time, that she usually attended aboriginal women's circles to drum and dance. More recently, in telephone conversations making, then breaking, appointments to meet, I have learned that she is married and has two children, a 15 year old daughter and an 8 year old son. We postpone our first interview when Shililyah learns that her mother has breast cancer. She sets aside her studies and travels to be with her mother during the subsequent mastectomy in another city. When she returns, she fits me into a schedule filled with exams and missed assignments. We reschedule the followup interview when first Shililyah, then her son fall ill with colds and flu. She alludes to domestic unrest telling me her month has been filled with "chaos and crisis."

In spite of the turmoil in her life, when we meet for the interviews, Shililyah appears composed, perhaps a benefit of the sage she tells me she has placed in her shoes to keep her grounded. She is younger than I remembered. I had thought 40; however, upon seeing her again, I revise my estimate downwards into the range of early to mid-thirties. Her soft voice, serious expression, longish black hair, and deep brown eyes match my memories.

During Shililyah's first storytelling session, she transforms the atmosphere of the pale pink-walled Human Ecology interview room when she lays down her life's artifacts—a small star blanket, pieced from purple, turquoise, orange, and ecru diamonds; two photographs, one of Sitting Bull, the other of three Indian women, the youngest of whom holds a baby; a seashell; a green tea light candle in a tall diamond willow holder; a necklace featuring a beaded Thunderbird; a wooden ball painted green and red; and a deck of Lakota Sweat Lodge Cards. The next time we meet, she brings her drum, a twenty inch circle of stretched animal skin.

I am curious to learn why Shililyah came to Sophia's Bridget circle, and smile when she tells me. She, too, had been conducting research. She agreed to join a schoolmate in studying wiccans as a "communities project," one of her Social Work assignments. Hearing about Sophia's Celtic goddess workshop, she decided to do a little fieldwork. "Mmm, what will Sophia make of that," I wonder. A male friend, another aboriginal, took extreme offence to Shililyah's decision to explore Sophia's Circle which further motivated her to attend. "I wanted to prove that there is nothing to fear, we are the same people," she says. Still, she found the experience "really did have a religious bent to it," something which made her feel uncomfortable. She remembers that my pink, "love-colored" votive, coming in the midst of experiencing something new, reminded her "to be very open and loving towards the difference."

Shililyah is sensitive to differences. She wonders how her story will fit with those of the other women in my study. "I'm of a different mold," she tells me, and she is quite right. Not only is her story different, but so is the way she tells it. Unlike Sophia and Dorian, Shililyah does not follow written notes to sequence her telling. Instead, true to her spiderline heritage, she spreads her story, web-like—crisscrossing strands, creating spaces—over both interviews. Her story challenges me. When she invites me to shuffle and put my energy into her Sweat Lodge cards, asking what I want to know, trusting the Universe to answer my question, I silently ask, "How can I best use Shililyah's story in my work?" The answer comes in the *Cha Wakan* or *Tree of Life* card which teaches, "In me, all life is One: There is no demarcation of 'other.'" Its message is one of acceptance:

> *Open your heart to all your brothers and sisters and to all of creation, relinquishing your judgments and expectations (of yourself and others). Allow all our relations to be exactly who they are; accept all that you are. We are all connected, parts of great Tree of Life in its thick foliage. Although each leaf has its own individual form and life, all grow from the same source, the same roots; all sway together in the same breezes. The tree grows strong and tall, with each leaf adding its part to the beauty of the whole. We must accept that each of us is only one leaf; by itself, one leaf does not make a tree.* (Lame Deer & Sarkis, 1994, p. 131-132)

as you can see from the picture I'm Sioux
my grandmother is in that picture
she has since gone to the spirit world
my mother, and then myself
my daughter
four generations right there
the four sacred directions came together
my grandmother wasn't doing well
her hips weren't good anymore
my mother had a lot of problems
addictions-wise
marital-wise, very abusive relationships
I was just a young woman in that picture
it's hard to tell, but I was only like 19, 18 years old
I had turned my back on our teachings

in that sense we're unique
because we were born with the teachings
we were never Catholic or Anglican
this was who we were
and, of course, very poor
my mother was a very young woman
when she had me, only 17, 18
ended up in an abusive relationship
somehow my mother believed
you could always find love outside yourself
in the white man
so she got involved with army men, airforce
in Manitoba
it was the beginning of very serious abuse for her
I lived with my grandparents quite a bit
I was sent back to them
because she was just not functional many times
my grandmother and grandfather
would talk of old stories all the time
sitting around the table beading

always be beading
grandmother would make me separate beads
from the time I was 5, 6 years old
I had to sit there separating beads
with her youngest daughter Darla
we were like sisters
and then there was my brother Chris too
we're a product of the Sixties Scoop[1]
my grandmother was raising Chris
same age as myself
I am April and he's November
she struggled with tuberculosis
my grandfather was the caregiver
he was a wonderful grandfather
the one who cooked and cleaned
my grandmother was very matriarchal
she gave the orders
told everyone *this is how you run the home*
everyone had roles
but they didn't see that for some reason
they figured that she was unable to look after us ...
even though she was bedridden
she was still knowing where we were
Darla would have been 8
Chris and I were 5 when this happened
I am from Manitoba
originally we came out of South Dakota
we're Oglala Sioux
my grandfather's Dakota
a very big man
lighter toned skin, hazelly-gray eyes
the bloods[2] didn't think he was Indian enough
because he didn't have this dark look
we were were taught as Indian people
traditionally, we weren't that dark
we were the color of the earth
so we change with the earth
camouflaging with the earth

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[1] "Federal government policy once placed an estimated 15,000 aboriginal children in non-native homes in hopes of giving them a more privileged upbringing. The practice, which continued from the 1960s to the 1980s, was known as the Sixties Scoop." The foregoing definition of the Sixties Scoop was found in an article entitled *Court weighs blood ties vs. adoptive ties* in The Edmonton Journal, February 16, 1999, p. A7.

[2] The bloods: Treaty Indians.

that is lacking in the teachings here
among the Cree
if you're connected with the earth
your skin changes with the earth
that's why so many of us are very fortunate
we don't burn
they don't understand this here
they don't understand these teachings
my grandmother went very dark
because of the lupus and the cancer
first it seems to fade you
then changes you a funny color
she became very ill in her time
that was abuse of medicine
the doctors pumped her full of medication
for a long time in their lives
our ceremonies, the sweats and things were outlawed
we couldn't do things like that
relations stole her pipe
she was a pipe carrier
all that outside energy got in
started to affect her in her age
she didn't like this place anymore
if you were lying
you were told the Coyote must be sitting with you
because *why would you say such a thing?*
you don't lie, you don't split the truth[3]
that's where my teachings probably came from
started from there
growing up with them off and on

my mother
she has many of the teachings
but chose to deny them
denial is the name of the game
deny, deny, deny
if we are sick
as she is recently doing
cancer
denial is the name of the game
she isn't allowing herself to go within
I had a very interesting week with her last week

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[3] **Split the truth: Telling only a sliver of the truth in order to deceive.**

she told me she that she has no desire to travel the world
because she has seen it all in her dreams
she travels in her dreams
she believes she's been to all these places
and maybe she has done that
she talked about flying
my mother is very perceptive, she sees spirits
she knows when they are around, she can feel them
yet, she does not want to go there in this lifetime
it's not something she wants to work on
which I find a struggle sometimes
'cause our teachings consist of that
we choose to be born
we come here to work out some lessons
if we don't work those lessons out, we will leave again
and we'll have to come back
she has not been able to change many of those lessons
that she chose to come here for
which brings up a fear within myself
she may leave us
because she won't work these things through
but that is a part of acceptance of death
dying and rebirth
that's very much a part of our teachings
in what's been happening with my mother
she shared with me a story about my birth
when I was born
it was like as if I had a deformity
this funny-shaped, four-directions cross
more like a star
on my forehead
my grandmother said I was one *Kanka*
one of spirit
Kanka in our teachings
is often known as *Grandmother Sorceress*
Grandmother Witch, Grandmother Healer
Kanka, one of those light beings
it went away, but they used to keep it covered
some people in the community had actually feared me
other people thought I had been dropped on my head
she never told this to me
I always wondered why, in pictures
there's a part of me that is always covered
it was interesting

I never knew it was called reiki[4]
but I have always done that type of energy healing
I met this wonderful woman
we did reiki together
she taught me how she does it and it's the same
in our work together
she has had the opportunity
to journey into my visions
this is something she had seen, she drew it
I thought, *isn't that interesting*
my mother gave this story to me, a birthright
as she was entering into extreme sickness
reminding me who I am

we are a very mystical people
we rely heavily on our interconnectedness
with the stars, the sun, and the moon
the universe and the earth
if someone were to ask me if I believe in God ...
I've always struggled with that word
from the time I was little
I learned this word *atheist*
when I was little
it was best for me to tell people
not knowing that I was offending them
that I was an atheist
I said, *no, I don't believe in God*
I guess I am an atheist
I was little, like 5, 6 years old
I got beaten up by kids for this a few times
parents refusing to let their kids play with me
how dare I say such a thing
then, in that turn
my mother always thought it was best
to send me back to my grandparents
'cause I just didn't fit
I could never fit into the norms of society
the education system
from the time I was in kindergarten

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[4] **Reiki: "a hands-on healing art based on the belief that there is a universal life energy present everywhere. When channelled properly this energy promotes healing" (Reader's Digest family guide to natural medicine: how to stay healthy the natural way, 1993, p. 99; Montreal: Reader's Digest Association, Canada).**

I couldn't fit
I couldn't figure out what was wrong
I was always different
the kids didn't like me
they were calling me names
very hard when you are little
I had a connection to animals
always had a connection to animals
like dogs
they were my best friends
my daughter is like that now
dogs are her best friends
people aren't, but dogs are
so where was I going
oh, about God, I never understood
because I never had those teachings

my mother married this man, Hendricks
Dutchman
very abusive man
she was swooned by his money
his parents were Roman Catholics
so anyways, in that time
when they were trying to make
this illusion of a happy marriage
they asked for me to come and stay with them
my grandparents sent me back
a lot of things happened in that time
that should never have happened
I was abused
in the hands of this man
but also abuse by the church
I was very much a native child
not mannered and disciplined
the code of strictness around them
you had to be immaculate ...
meant to be seen and not heard
running through the grass barefoot
playing out in the field all day was not acceptable
I didn't fit again
they sent me to this Catholic school
there was nuns and a priest
it had a church attached to it
of course, I'm the only Indian kid there

so the nun figured she has to teach me
she's going to teach me 'cause I was unruly
and I didn't want to pray
I remember not wanting to pray to their things
'cause I didn't know what they were praying to
I didn't understand it
that thing about walking up the aisle and taking that piece of Jesus
almost did me in
well, no thank you
when, I was little, actually thinking
how did you get a piece of that person?
my so-called grandmother was Dutch
very, very Dutch
she couldn't explain this to me
I was a Sioux child, I spoke Sioux
I was learning English
she was Dutch, learning English
so you had just two different worlds coming together
it didn't fit
there was nothing they were going to do
to get that piece of Jesus inside me
I stormed out of the church
I was strapped severely for that
I ended up being strapped quite often in the church
end of Grade 1
I cut some of my hair and put it in my hands[5]
I said, *I will feel this, and never forget it for the rest of my life*

my grandmother knew
I was having a hard time
I mean I wasn't allowed to talk to her
but she knew
the abuse had started with my mother
she was been horrendously beaten by Hendricks
she was going to break free from him
my uncle Tom came
had gotten me out of this school
brought me back to my mother
hoping that would help
then my mother's sister Elsie came
she tried to help raise me

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[5] **Shililyah later explained that the cutting of hair represented mourning and "rebirthing the self in great pain."**

the whole idea was that Elsie and Tom
were there to protect my mother too
Hendricks had no idea what an Indian family was like
he figured everybody was bumming off him
he started fighting drastically with Tom
ended up abusing my mother's sister
so in that turn
Tom took me right away and sent me back to Manitoba
that was the beginning of that exposure to another type of religion
but it wasn't healthy, it was not a good journey
so I chose from that point on that I was an atheist
because if any god they had
could do that to a person
then that is not a good god
I was young
this went on for a long time
like it started when I was 5 years of age
and it didn't actually end for me until I was 11
by then many things were imprinted
by then my mother had been through three relationships
three very abusive relationships
that started her journey of abuse

we went full circle it seemed
we came from Manitoba
down through Sarnia
out to Nova Scotia
back up towards South Hampton, Owen Sound
I was 9 then, maybe a little younger, 8
this man Glenn Weber
I'll never forget him
'cause I think he would be a starting point
for my spiritual awareness
knowing that there was something stronger
that existed within myself
I was still a very happy kid, no matter what
I was still happy in myself
I didn't have this need for all these friends
I was kept very isolated
but I still found entertainment in myself
I talked all the time
I was talking to animals, outside
walking through the bush
rescued baby rabbits and brought them home

just an example of the kind of abusive man Hendricks was
I had rescued these baby rabbits
brought them home, made this pen
I was just a young girl, like 7, 8 years old
Hendricks got involved
he killed them
he was a sick man, on drugs
in that era, the early seventies
they were really getting into that cult-type activity
they would dress up in devil-worshipping stuff
have really sick orgy-type parties
I remember watching this as a little girl
seeing what they were doing
thinking *there must be something wrong with these people*
never being able to understand
and praying, not realizing I was praying
I would pray to the moon and to the stars
my grandmothers and my grandfathers
hear me, hear me
and then Glenn emerged
he was an Indian man
very much the traditional Indian
to look at him when I was a little girl
I didn't think nothing of him
but to look at him as a woman ...
a beautiful man
he had long black hair and nice creamy brown skin
deep intense eyes, strong jaw line
six foot
he came in on his motorcycle to work
he had an electrical contract with Hydro
he needed somewhere to stay
Hendricks, for some reason, took to this man
offered him room and board with us
how I was still with Hendricks was that he had a lot of money
he had sued my mother, literally kidnapped me from the reserve
held me more as ransom to my mother
to control her
she wasn't coming back
so he was able to buy the courts off
it didn't matter what I said to the courts
in that system, the man had the power
I was totally powerless
I wasn't even his child, you know

but he had the power
it didn't make sense
why I had to live with this man who wasn't even my father
he was abusive and sexually abusive
Glenn came in and all that stopped
all of a sudden Hendricks didn't abuse me anymore
Glenn would come, pick me up after school
take me for dinner
people thought I was his little girl
we would spend our weekends at the reserve
I started pow-wow dancing
he would ask questions, in a roundabout way
never direct, about my family
where's your mother?
where's your grandparents?
I was very young, I wouldn't tell him
I'd go off into my fantasy world
I remember once we were out trapping
we found a little wolf club, but its mother was gone
he had said I could bring this cub back home with us
if I treated it right, it would be my protector
and that's exactly what it was
Hendricks shot it
I had to stay with him until I was 9
then one day, I was sitting there talking to Glenn
I was wise beyond my years at this point
Glenn was sitting there and I just said to him
I wonder what would happen
'cause I noticed where we lived on #2 highway in Owen Sound
that this bus always came by, and these truckers
I said, *So where do they go?*
and he told me they went to London
I knew my mother was in London
I had lost communication to her because of Hendricks
I know in my heart
she was always trying to get communication to me
but he would stop it
so somehow, within me, I knew how to get hold of her
through my own spirit
I remember praying one night
telling her *I am coming*
but anyways, I had shared with Glenn
funny, I had told him
'cause he could have stopped the whole thing

I wonder what would happen
if a little boy was standing on the highway
and a trucker came by
and I said, *I wonder if I would get a ride*
I wonder if I told them I was from London
ran out here looking for my relatives at the reserve
I can't even say, as a little person, that I was actually going to do it
but it was just something that came out of me
then two nights later, Hendricks had a party
it was one of those orgy parties again
I thought *this is sick*
as a little person
this is terrible
many people say
that people become very spiritual
because of abuse
I don't disagree with that
I believe that some do
but in my case
I was given spirit
I was spirit before my abuse started
I believe that is what got me through my abuse
I hate the word *abuse*
because there are lessons in life
as harmful as they were
in the hands of one individual
but then, as I grew, they became many different hands
coming at you
one thing I found that is missing in a lot of the literature
you have spirit when you are born
your life's lessons make you more resilient
as bad as they were, I had to go through them
they were gifts because it was just the beginning
of what I was going to experience
my grandmother would tell me
this is the road of the healer
you have to truly have seen darkness in order to see light
it goes back to that old song that Indian people sing
you may beat my skin, but you can never take my soul
that is something she would tell me
no matter what happens, nobody can take that from you ...
sticks and stones may break your bones
but names will never hurt me
a very old Indian saying

a lot of people didn't know that
the sticks of the trees, that's our life force
the stones of our ancestors, you may beat us with them
but you will never break our spirit
you are giving spirit
making us more and more resilient
we just get stronger and stronger
they wanted us to assimilate
we are still here, still independent
we are getting stronger, you know
you're abused as a child
it's a process
you go through these lessons
that is what is going to help you
in turn, working with your sisters
all we are is energy, blood, water
people like to make this so complicated
when this physical form dies, we don't die
a factor many women have shut down to
I often wonder if that's because of the church
some of the things that they have taught women
not to honor self
myths about moontime
you are the giver of life, but you are dirty
many years ago, in our teachings as Sioux women
we separated ourselves from the men
because our energy was very powerful
our creative side opened right up
your psychic eye opened right up in that time
traditionally women would get together
healing and creating and laughing
but somehow that got changed in this society
abuse, especially sexual abuse comes in
men see the woman's power and they want that
naturally women do have a more nurturing side
we're the giver of life
the man, instinctively, has been the hunter of life
the protector
in our teachings, we have dog soldiers
they guarded the camp
I believe Glenn Weber was a dog soldier
sent to me as protection
he did his job until I left
'cause one day I woke up and I did exactly what I told him I would do

that put an end to that cycle with Hendricks
recently, you know
when I re-entered school
I was on a change, a big change
many losses
lost four immediate relatives to cancer
my grandmother had died
Darla was murdered
that was really, really tough
Darla, my grandmother's baby
two years older than me, like my sister
she was murdered
then Elsie, and Edna, and John
John died first, he was my uncle
my grandmother's son
died of stomach cancer
then Edna was diagnosed with cancer
Elsie died, she had lupus and cancer
then Edna died
all of them had many, many issues that they hadn't dealt with
the exposure of residential school, the abuses
the whole exposure of being Indian
they all felt
if we just weren't Indian, it would all end
bitterness and anger can consume you
it manifests as illness
John became a bitter man
Elsie gave up on life, gave up on relationships
became very ill, bitter and angry
Edna, abused all her relationship with the same man
finally had gotten onto the road to sobriety
returned to the teachings
there still had to be stuff she wouldn't look at
cervical cancer was her chance to go back, and look, and heal
you can heal from cervical cancer, but she wouldn't
I think she was tired
she was only in her late thirties
just had lived more life than most women see
Darla's murder was very hard
Darla was murdered at the hands of that man
who was stalking native women in Manitoba
just felt all native women were whores
she was five and a half months pregnant
my mother is probably on her third bout of illness now

it makes you wonder if she is really going to look at this stuff
in my understanding of death we choose to be here
we have lessons
if we can't do those lessons we have to check out
we'll have to come back again
that is the cycle
we grieve and we hurt
but it is also important to remember the lessons
I was diagnosed with cancer
it would have been easier for me to have given up
I had 97% gall bladder disease
it was all cancerous
I was kinda, at the time
oh, it's nothing, it's just a gallbladder, get it out
but it was major
I don't recall, ever, at diagnosis saying *I'm in trouble*
I'm going to check out
but I knew that the cancer was to look at my own life
at this point, in my late twenties
I had come so far back to my teachings
I wasn't going to come back any further
but that wasn't my role
I came back here to do more
whether that is the role of the healer
I came back here for that reason
I didn't want to do it anymore
it looked too hard, too tough
I gave up
I wasn't pursuing my own needs
I began to turn my life over to other people.
my husband would have been one of those people
he's of Druid ancestry
his mother was known as the town witch
she played with tarot cards, teacup readings
I'd watch her, never asked her to do mine
she was married to a very abusive man
my husband Allan is so similar to his father
his father took everything out on him
he wouldn't allow this boy to have his own identity
Allan ended up running away, a brave thing
started working construction
I remember having this crush on him
I was about 16, 17
I was no longer in school, I only went to grade 9

he came in, five years older than me
offered to look after me, I guess, protect me
I thought that's all you needed
I chose to live like that for many years
but, in that process of him growing up
his own issues came up in his face
he became an alcoholic, an abuser
a persecutor, a victim, a rescuer
he became all those things in front of me
I'm still with him today, but we have been apart
I can't even say what's going to happen
the rules all changed when I became sick
he wasn't able to be there for me
I learned then that I didn't have to rely on anybody but myself
I think that was the biggest lesson
that nobody can help you
nobody but you and spirit
when you're hanging over that toilet
there is nothing else there but you
you really get to look inside yourself
I don't know what changed
I remember knowing *oh, I need help*
and they came to me
my grandmothers, my grandfathers
came to me
I returned to the teachings
I went back to the sweats
it all came back naturally
four surgeries
I thought everything was significant
everything was in fours
it was all very much part of my teachings

then I decided it was time for me to return to my life
I returned to school which was a hard thing to do
I had to quit in Grade 9
I have returned to school off and on throughout the years
never to high school
I always thought
that formal institutional education wasn't my education
my education came from life
at every stage of my life, an obstacle
as soon as it got calm, *don't breathe too long*
something came in

that's what my whole life has been like
from childhood
through seeing my favorite animal hit by a truck
this beautiful red retriever
I collected dogs
if they were chained up, I took them off the chain
brought them home, told Mom I found them
my best prize was somebody's Saint Bernard
I had a passion for Saint Bernards
people didn't like this little heathen in their neighbourhood
if I wasn't picking their flowers, I was taking their dogs
this beautiful Saint Bernard, I called him Tiny
he was huge, big, big
his owners were mistreating him, I knew that
I brought him a treat
I was playing and kissing him
I said to my Mom and my aunt Elsie
You know, they don't treat him well, we should keep him
they fell in love with him
the owner came, using all this profanity
stupid mutt, got loose again
my aunt says *you don't deserve that dog*
leave the dog with us, we'll look after it
he says to my aunt, at the door
you heathens are all the same
but we kept Tiny
he would sit on our front doorstep like a dog soldier
he would lay near my mother's feet
Hendricks could not get near my mother
he couldn't raise his voice
Hendricks feared Tiny
it took Hendricks a good year to figure out how to get rid of Tiny
but by then my mother had figured out
how she would get out of this relationship
people laugh
but every animal that came into our home had a purpose
we had another one, a beagle
old, old beagle
I found him in a field somewhere, brought him home
old Skipper
we had a break-in
it was someone who was life threatening
to my mother and myself
Skipper gave his life protecting us

he didn't even know us, but he gave his life that day
these dog soldiers come in
whether they are in human or animal form
in healing through my cancer
through school
I met another dog soldier, Mike
a beautiful Indian man, beautiful
reminded me of Glenn Weber
he has been on his own journey of pain
great pain
still stuck rescuing the helpless damsels
hasn't looked at his stuff that deeply
we developed a really good relationship
at that time, I was apart from my husband
felt he was going to go his separate way
I had met this man
when I first met him I would never ever have said
that I noticed him, or liked him
but, all of a sudden, one day I woke up
I noticed this man in totality
a knowingness of the soul
the visions, the dreams came to me
I knew this man
we met many times before
many lives before
we had happy times and we had bad times
we had a past where I had been stoned to death
this person had seen it all happen
he became enraged
that deep anger unconsciously motivated his life
his pattern of being a persecutor, an abuser, a batterer
he became victim, alcoholic, suicidal
now he is a rescuer
what is interesting is seeing it for what it was
my soul is mirroring
you see the rescuer in him
what are you rescuing?
I was trying to rescue my husband
I can't rescue him anymore
he has to rescue himself

I never want anybody to think I am
this totally spiritually person
'cause I'm not

I'm life, resemblance of life
I have weight problems
I fight with the addictions of modern day food
I like to have a drink now and then
and as an Indian woman
apparently we are not supposed to do that
but, that is not true
Grandmother Sorceress
every now and then, with moon ceremony
would have firewater
it allows you to look and laugh and be humorous about who you are
you have to have humor
when you've been just a horrible, rotten person
a good example
Saturday, I have no reason to be in Costco
I have no money
but I was bored so I set myself up
I own all of it
it was busy, pay week
all the out-of-towners were in shopping
I am pushing my cart through Costco for no apparent reason
this man was in his own world
I was observing him bumping into everybody
you could feel his aura, his anger, just radiating
for some reason I wanted to feel his chaos
something made me move that way, an unconscious thing
I'm going to move into his aura
I'm going to get in his way
he was so mad, his face got really red
I am looking at him, listening to him put me down
in my head, I was still telling myself, *don't judge*
just accept, this is his space
but the *heyoka*[6] in me says, nice smile on my voice, *asshole*
I couldn't believe it
so much for *let's just be kind for today*
but I watched him be mean to all these older women
he was targeting women
why I done that, I don't know
the man didn't retaliate, didn't fight back
it humbled him
but that's not the answer, to deal with people

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[6] **heyoka: contrary, bringer of lessons, may show an action opposite of what is needed and the consequences of that action.**

but I thought
man, listen to yourself
you're being an asshole
that woman didn't deserve that
everybody has the right to be here and shop
you chose to be here at that same time
so did I
I had said to myself immediately after
so much for let's be kind
we'll have to work on this one again
I hear all these people give themselves these long range journeys
you can't do that
it's just for today
sometimes just for the moment
I will be kind, just for today
I well let go, just for today
I will honor myself, just for today
I will trust my intuitive knowingness, just for today
trust and belief are probably the hardest things to work on
and kindness
to be kind to another living being is very hard

I brought a star blanket
my daughter was wrapped in it
when we are born we are wrapped in a star blanket
because we believe that we are interconnected with the universe
the stars, some people call them Pleiades
there is belief that we are descendants of the Pleiadian people
who's to say
that's not ours to say
we are energy beings, we are just energy
what we see physically is our frame of reference
dominant norms
we make up what we see
I can see grandmothers and grandfathers sitting with us
many people can't
they don't allow that to come in
my fourth great-grandfather is Sitting Bull
we're descendants of Sitting Bull and Gall
I am part of the ancestry of the Spider family
from the Dakotas
we have been known to be *Kanka*
the healers, the shamans
that is who we are

Sitting Bull was the visionary
the prophet, the intuitive-knower
some of us were gifted with all of it
it's just like ceremonies
some of us dance, some of us sing
some of us drum
if you're drumming
you're healing for many
you pray and heal for many
everything you do is for many
not just for one

the necklace
my grandmother made that for me
because she had known that the people were coming
they were going to cause problems
we might be taken away
my journey was going to begin
I was protected as safe as she could protect me
on the necklace is *Wambli*
the eagle, the Thunderbird
some people call it the phoenix
that raises out of the flame
rebirth, the flame of rebirth
the colors in it are really significant
because they are not necessarily Sioux
red, black, yellow colors, and white
the white represents the white nation
I was going to have to go into that nation
with the white people
they were going to be everywhere around
when something is made for you or given to you
the lessons in it will come up to you
they will speak to you
it's your lesson, your journey
so that was given to me when I was 5
the onslaught of the Sixties Scoop
Chris had one too
it would be interesting to know if Chris is even alive
if he still had it

the candle is the fire
entering into the fire
the sweat lodge

birth and rebirth
fire gives you warmth and nourishment
but fire can also destroy
it's knowing, honoring that flame of fire
because that is your life force
I have many ancestors
Sitting Bull, Poundmaker, Spotted Eagle
they sit around the council fire with us
I know they are there
I have seen spirit from when I was little
when you need them most they come

I certainly hope that whoever takes this material and reads it
doesn't view it as a victim model
because too often they say
well, the reason that person ended up
on a spiritual journey is because of the abuse
I disagree
the journey of spirit starts when you are born
we choose this journey
the victim that I had to become
in some ways was part of that journey
I'm heyoka
I like to take the long way around
the hardest route to get there
I dance to a different beat

Chapter 5

Revisiting the Research

As I draw my research report to a close, I revisit the stories I have written about my experiences and the experiences of others who feel drawn to forms of spirituality which honour women. When I began my report, I claimed the voice of an academic storyteller; however, I did not know how to name the kind of work I was attempting. In closing, I know I was trying to tell an "impressionist's tale ... a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined ... a (braiding together) of the knower with the known" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 102).[1] The impressionist's tale I have learned "points to the discomforting fact that we are unable to do more than partially describe what it is we know and do. We know more than we can say and will know even more after saying it" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 123). Having said what I know, I find I do know more, so I return to my research report—to add, amend, and amplify—although I recognize that I can never "get it right." As sociologist Laurel Richardson says "there is no such thing as 'getting it right,' only 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced"(1998, p. 354).

Revisiting Awakening

I have identified the genesis of my research as being the spiritual awakening I experienced in the early months of 1986. I still wonder about the events which surrounded my birth and rebirth day. In readings associated with my study, I came across a passage by Christina Baldwin which started me wondering anew. She says that many people can tell stories about coming awake, of experiencing a click that occurs in the mind which enables them to witness themselves in the midst of their own actions, a time of consciousness in which the larger Self and the smaller self become aware that they are accompanying each other, a time when the ego has a consultant, an inner voice of guidance—the Soul's voice (1994, p. 9). In 1986, in my time of awakening, I did not think my "teaching presence" had a voice because it did not communicate with me in words, now I wonder if the presence *was* voice, the voice of my Soul.

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[1] Van Maanen speaks of impressionist painting as an attempt to "evoke an open, participatory sense in the viewer and as with all revisionist forms of art, to stretch complacent viewers accustomed to and comfortable with older forms" (1988, p. 101). He likens an impressionist's tale to impressionist painting. Presumably readers are invited to participate and be stretched in ways similar to viewers.

In my second interview with Sophia, I found myself wondering, yet again, about my rebirth experiences when I asked what she thought motivated an interest in women-centred spirituality. Her answer matched my experiences of awakening. She said "many women at mid-life come apart in ways that are unexpected.[2] The traditional norms and definitions for 'womanhood' no longer work. The churches, by and large, don't address their questions either. Women begin to look to peers and their own experience—to set new norms and definitions ... it's a sign of growing confidence and growing competence in women's lives." I lived my rebirth in just such a way—as a dissatisfaction with my conventional roles as wife, mother, daughter; as a growing toward greater autonomy in thought and action; as an inability to find answers to my life's questions sitting in mainstream church pews; and as an unexpected coming apart. I also lived my fortieth birthday awakening as an internal opening of a "god-shaped vacuum"[3] which I had no success in filling until I recognized that God might have a female form.

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[2] Throughout my study, I have heard, from my co-researchers and others, that women begin to pay greater attention to spiritual concerns in mid-life. According to Elizabeth Ozarak, an American psychology professor, recent studies do support such a claim (1996, p. 17).

[3] I cannot remember where I read the words " the god-shaped vacuum;" however, I do recall that I when I first read them, I felt they described what I was experiencing as an opening deep within which ached to be filled with a belief in the Divine—a most uncomfortable feeling for a humanist!

Narrative: A Second Look

At the end of my study, as at its inception, I believe there is a natural fit in using narrative methodology to document women's spiritual biographies because "the expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories" (Christ, 1986, p. 1). I am satisfied that narrative inquiry has proven its usefulness in illuminating how Sophia, Dorian, Shililyah and I experience our spirituality. My belief that "stories connect the mind to the social world (providing) the best clues about why people act the way they do (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, p. 1) remains intact. I also remain frustrated with attempts to articulate what narrative inquiry is. Perhaps because "the use and application of this research method seems to have preceded the formalization of a philosophy and methodology parallel to the practice" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 1), I could not find an easily understandable explication of narrative research to offer. Still, at an intuitive level, academics and nonacademics alike seem to grasp the potential for narrative research to create knowledge because "our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell, with the stories that we dream or imagine, or would like to tell.... we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, virtually uninterrupted monologue" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 160).

Changes to Consider in Future Narrative Inquiries

Reviewing my research design, I consider what I might change if I were to carry this work forward. Firstly, I would allow more time for researcher/co-researcher interaction to cultivate stronger research relationships. I began interviewing in late January and finished in late June. In those five months, I interviewed Sophia and Dorian three times, face-to-face, in addition to "meeting" with them briefly in telephone conversations. Sophia and I exchanged occasional emails. Shililyah and I met for storytelling on two occasions and talked on the telephone, at some length, on several more. I am not dissatisfied with the relationships my co-researchers and I have established; they are mutually respectful. Given more time, however, I believe our relationships would have deepened, engendering greater feelings of equality and connectedness. The importance of such relationship attributes needs to be underscored, not only for moral and ethical reasons, but also, as Clandinin and Connelly (1998) caution, because insensitivity to the centrality of relationship in research can result in the researchers deceiving themselves and others into thinking that they "know more about the participants' ongoing lives than is epistemologically warranted" (p. 168).

Another change in research strategy I would consider for future studies involves interviewing style. Although I was satisfied with my first, open-ended interviews in which Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah related their stories in their own way, I was less pleased with the followup interviews which were structured by my questions. Another time, instead of perpetuating a process in which one party asks questions and the other does all the talking, a process in which the "power of social science determines the information given" (Denzin, 1989, p. 43), I would like to experiment with conceptualizing my interviewing as "a process in which two or more persons creatively share experience with one another in a mutual search for greater self-understanding" (Denzin, 1989, p. 43). Setting a more conversational tone in interview as well as experimenting with group interviews seem promising strategies (See Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 168; Minister, 1991, p. 32-33).

Contextualizing Women's Spirituality

Throughout my study, whenever I thought of contextualizing my work, I would return to the "What's going on here?" question, visualizing a research model composed of three nested circles. Sophia, Dorian, Shililyah, and I, along with our stories, were housed in the innermost ring, surrounded in turn by other rings which first encompassed Sophia's Circle, then the women's spirituality movement. Mentally, I often drew one more circle, a container for the other three, which similarly enclosed spiritualities and religions of every ilk, representing, more broadly, the efflorescence of late twentieth century responses to the religious impulse.[4] According to writer Jane Lampman (1998, p. A4), "those who chart the course of religious trends—and communicate with believers—see a religious transformation taking place that indicates we are entering a new era." She says the "planet's peoples are focussing with new earnestness on matters of faith and the spirit," perhaps as a result of "tumultuous change, massive population shifts to urban centres, unprecedented warfare, rise and collapse of ideologies, spread of consumer culture, and breakneck technological developments."[5] Just as Sophia's Circle proved to be an expression of "something bigger"—the women's spirituality movement—the movement itself can be seen as an expression of "something bigger" still.

The Women's Circle Experience

In introducing my ethnographic account of the Candlemas celebration I cautioned against regarding the afternoon's events as typical of either a meeting of Sophia's Circle in particular or of a women's spirituality gathering in general—a point I would like to stress once more. Sophia researches and plans her gatherings, carefully scripting events which have included visiting an inner city community garden, joining a group of Morris dancers for a May Day event, and acting out a day as lived in a mediaeval monastery. Other women's circles practice far more spontaneous rituals and share leadership (Northup, 1997, pp. 45-47). We catch a glimpse of such a group in Dorian's story of the women she continues to meet with irregularly, years after they formed a circle following a spirituality class.

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[4] The religious impulse, according to writer Janette Turner Hospital (1998, p. 7), is "the impulse to give meaning and coherence and purpose to life, to encase our animal existence in a superstructure of teleological thought, and to mark with ritual those events (birth, love, death) that ... remain mysterious and still evoke awe."

[5] Lampman (1998, A4) puts forward a variety of evidence in support of the claim that there has been a dramatic interest in spirituality and religion as we approach the millennium. She points out that the Internet now carries some 140 million pages related to religion; that "spirituality" is the fastest growing field in U.S. book publishing; that while the world's population has grown by 60 per cent since 1970, the number of evangelical Christians has risen by 126 per cent; and that in a 1998 Gallop poll, more than two thirds of Americans said religion could "solve all or most of our problems." Lampman says that in the search to find a spiritual centre for their lives, some people have returned to "fundamentalist" roots of faith, be they in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism. Others have ventured into "new realms of worship with an emphasis on 'experiencing God' as opposed to observing dogma and creeds."

Telling Thoughts

At last I come again to Sophia, Dorian, and Shililyah and their tellings. I went in search of women who shared my interest in women's circle spirituality wondering how the bits and pieces of their stories would fit with the pieces and bits of my own. I find that we are alike and different. Dorian is divorced, Sophia, single; Shililyah and I are married. Dorian and I grew up Protestant; Sophia and Shililyah did not. Shililyah is Sioux; unlike Sophia, Dorian, and me. The stories we tell of the meaningful moments in our lives are unique; yet we are the same in that we live out our interest in women's circle spirituality in the same historical moment. We share calendar time—1999—and place—Edmonton, Canada, the Western world. We are what Denzin calls *universal singulars*. He explains: "no individual is ever just an individual.... she must be ... (considered) as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes. Every person is like every other person, but like no other person" (1989, p. 19) which makes it possible to explore a particular life in hope of coming to understand a way of life at a particular time and place in unfolding history. Sophia, Dorian, Shililyah and I are single instances of a universal theme—women on spiritual quests, trying to make the best sense we can out of our lives and times. The tales we tell are the texts of narrative inquiry which autoethnographer Arthur Bochner (Ellis & Bochner, 1999) describes as:

> *... stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of*

> *unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question.* (p. 16)

Such narrative texts says Bochner "refuse the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination.... They long to be used rather than analysed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than unrivaled truths; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts" (p. 17). Bochner's words assure me that I made the best choice in electing not to attempt a formal analysis of the stories in my study. Although I looked at a number of methods for analyzing narratives, I rejected them all—some because they call for training and knowledge I don't possess; others because they seem fruitless exercises. In setting aside thoughts of analysis, I contented myself with my interpretations of the stories, the shaping work I did—selecting some words, deleting others—drawing forth the "patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 170) I heard on the interview tapes. I trust that readers will find the best ways to use the stories, finding in them the lessons they need to carry forward in conversations.

Not long after I made my decision to forego any attempts to analyze the tellings, Shililyah called. She said she had reread my representation of her story several times before she could go through it dry-eyed. "It's so powerful," she said. "Thank you for telling it using my words—for not adding any, for not putting on it what you think it meant. I can see how much I have gone through when I see it all set out like that—and I only told you a little bit." I can only guess at the lessons she found in my rendering of her words.

My conversation with Shililyah reminded me, once again, that the stories I have represented in my research account are provisional and incomplete. All of the women made decisions regarding how much of their life stories they would share; and I, in turn, made further decisions about how much and what parts of those stories I would shape into research texts. If we were to come together again, to repeat the research process, I suspect we would make different decisions about what to say and how to say it because "with each telling, we discover more of what we know" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 120).

Such is the magic of an impressionist's tale—it can never be finished (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 120)—which leaves me wondering how to end the story of my research. To do so, I think I need to return to my research report once more—this time to revisit the guiding statement I used at the beginning of my inquiry:

I want to document the stories/the storytelling of women
who are constructing a spiritual life from a confluence of sources
THE G*D
at the centre of the women's stories
might be male, but probably isn't
may be female and More
may be Nature
might be nurture
is
For(e)most
Mystery
and
For Me
SPIDER

When I wrote the statement back in September, I thought it would be important to find out how the women in my study named the ineffable and that I thought it equally important to record, at the outset of my work, that I thought of MY GOD as *SPIDER*—in case I chose to rename MY GOD in response to the women's stories. In closing then, I report my findings.

Sophia was reminded of something from classical mediaeval mysticism—*The Cloud of Unknowing*—when she spoke of the God she encountered in the mist as a teenager. She carried that experience forward in thoughts of "a diffuse, great Mystery." She says:

> *I guess the Cloud of Unknowing is Mystery, ... the closest I could say to who or what Spirit is.... Sometimes I name the Mystery and sometimes I don't. Sometimes it's gendered and sometimes it's not. I think all those things are true.... The sacred is immanent. It is transcendent. All at the same time. We use metaphor because that is what we have ... yet nothing can really describe or contain that experience. I guess Mystery would be the basic concept for me. Paul Tillich, a theologian ... talked about the "ground of all being" and Rosemary Reuther gives us this idea of the "matrix of all being." So it is something like that. It is hard to talk about or describe—always approximate, changing.*

Because Dorian brought a picture of the Goddess to our first meeting, I asked her, in the second interview, "Who or what is the Goddess for you? Do you incorporate the Goddess in your prayers?" She answered:

> *Well, I think the different goddess types and descriptions speak to the different aspects and parts of who I am as a woman. I think they're metaphors that can speak to me and give me a sense of the rhythms of life, ..., the sacredness of life, the joys of life, the sorrows of life, all of that together. I think the descriptions of the Goddess, her roles or her archetypes, are fluid—like we are.*
>
> *At this point, I pray to "Sacred Spirits"—that fits more for me than just saying "Goddess," because I think there are many different types of sacred spirits, and, in some ways, I believe there is a greater sacred energy that can comfort us, enfold us, be with us, or resonate with us.... Sometimes these things are so hard to put into words. I think what prayer does for me is that it allows me to enfold that energy. Sometimes I will say "O Sacred Goddess, Sacred Mother" depending on what I feel I need.*

Shililyah does not speak of *God* or *Goddess*; she speaks of *Grandmother Sorceress* and *White Buffalo Calf Woman*. She says we are all energy and has seen *spirit* since she was a child. Her prayers change according to what she is *calling in* and she prays from from her heart, *not from a book*. Sometimes she prays *Wanka Tonka, Grandmothers, Grandfathers, hear me.*

Coincidentally, so do I. I sometimes call upon my *Grandmothers and Grandfathers*, and most recently, in morning meditations, I invoke the Goddess Matt, the figure who centres Dorian's Adjustment card, asking her help in grounding my ideas in writing. From the work of Angeles Arrien (1995), the tarot teacher Dorian mentioned, I have learned that the Thoth Adjustment card is my symbol of growth for 1999—an indication that this year is a good year to bring my life into balance—"a good time to write, start a diet, and balance the check book" (p. 284). As I end my writing, I turn my thoughts to diet and financial concerns. I see no need to rename *SPIDER*.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Title: Called by the Circle: Women's Spiritual Life Stories

Researcher:	**Research Supervisor:**
Janis Shaw	Dr. Nanci Langford
Graduate Student	Assistant Professor
Department of Human Ecology	Department of Human Ecology
University of Alberta	University of Alberta
3-54 Human Ecology Building	3-02 Human Ecology Building
# 492-5385	# 492-9277

As you will have determined from the reading of my research proposal, the purpose of this study is to record the spiritual life stories of women who are drawn to woman-centred spirituality. The study's interviews will focus on the beliefs and practices of participants as well as the ways in which women's spiritual lives unfold.

Your participation in the study will involve the following:

- You will be interviewed twice for approximately 2 hours each time. Interviews will be recorded on audiotape and you will be asked to review the tapes for further comment and clarification. You will be given a copy of the interview tapes for your personal archives. In the first interview, you will be asked to identify and expand on four or five turning points in your spiritual unfolding. As the interview proceeds, I may ask an occasional question for clarification, but mainly I will listen as you recreate your experience. You are invited to bring any objects, books, or photos to the interview which will help you "tell your story." In the second interview, I will ask specific questions about your beliefs and practices. If you and the other women who participate in this study show an interest in meeting one another, I may arrange a group interview to end my information gathering.

- You will be contacted for 2-3 short followup interviews to review and validate my analyses. Each followup interview, about 1/2 hour in duration, will be conducted in person or by telephone, according to your wishes. I anticipate that the time commitment you will make in becoming a research participant will be 7-10 hours.

- Your identity and the information you give will be kept confidential—a pseudonym will be used to code your tape transcriptions and for attributing quotations in future publications or presentations. You may choose the pseudonym if you so desire. Although I can not guarantee you anonymity, every effort will be made to preserve your privacy. You will be given an opportunity to withdraw any volunteered information prior to its publication and presentation.

- Should your participation in this study require you to pay for parking or bus fares, you will be fully reimbursed.

As a participant in this study, your rights are as follows:

1. You may refuse to answer any questions at any time in the interviews.

2. You may stop the interview at any time.

3. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

4. You may call the researcher (962-0532) or the researcher's supervisor (492-9277) at any time with questions or concerns.

5. For one year following the acceptance of my thesis, upon request, I will provide you with publications arising from my research.

Risks and benefits to participants:

The risks to you are minimal although there is a remote possibility that the first interview's life review may call forth emotionally stirring memories. I can refer you to secular or spiritual counsellors if you would like to further explore your responses. I hope you will enjoy being interviewed and will appreciate the opportunity to record your spiritual life stories while educating others about involvement in women-centred spirituality.

CONSENT:

I acknowledge that the research procedures described above and of which I have a copy have been explained to me, and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. In addition, I know that I may contact the persons designated on this form, if I have any questions now or in the future. I understand the possible benefits of joining the research study, as well as the possible risks and discomforts. I have been assured that personal records relating to this study will be kept confidential. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to myself.

____
(Name)

____
(Signature of Participant)

____
(Name)

____
(Signature of Witness)

____
(Date)

____
(Signature of Investigator or Designee)

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE[1]

Please note: The following questions/probes were meant to be used, as a backup, if a woman's spiritual life stories failed to develop in the first relatively unstructured interview. All of the women told their stories without the aid of these questions. Prior to the second interview, I read over the questions and chose a few of ask to extend the *stories* recorded in the first. Many of the questions listed below were answered, without my asking them, in the women's first interview tellings.

BEGINNINGS

Please begin by telling me a little bit about yourself.
How would a good friend describe you?
Please tell me why you decided to participate in this research project.

HISTORY WITH THE CIRCLE

How many circles have you attended?
What attracted you to the circle?
What do you gain by attending?
Do you attend the Circle alone or do you come with a friend?
What would you say if you were to describe the Circle to a friend? To someone you didn't know very well?
Describe your experience at your last Circle meeting?

BACKGROUND

Do you have any current religious, spiritual, personal growth affiliations?
What were your earliest religious affiliations?
Would I be correct in saying that you have an interest in women's spirituality?
How do you define spirituality? Women's spirituality? Is it the same as feminist spirituality? Why or why not?
How has women's spirituality changed or influenced your life?
Do you think that women's spirituality is emerging as a new religion?
How do you sustain your interest in women's spirituality?

- Books?
- Journals?
- Newsletters?
- Groups?
- Classes?

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[1] Some of the questions in this interview guide were taken from the work of Anderson & Hopkins (1991), Eller (1993), and Winter, Lummis, & Stokes (1995).

Workshops?
Friends?
Mentors?
To what extent are each of the above important to your current practices?
(Women would be asked to elaborate on any of the above resources which they thought had been instrumental in shaping their thinking regarding spiritual concerns. Names of books, journals, newsletters, classes and workshops would be sought.)
Are you currently in a women's spirituality group?
How long has this group been together?

BELIEFS
Do you believe in a deity? If so, what is god/dess like?
Male and/or female?
Why is it significant that the goddess is female?
One or many?
In all things? Separate and above?
Capable of controlling historical events? Does s/he?
Does he/she exist even for those who don't believe in or recognize god/dess?
The following are common images of god: Pick three which have meaning for you and tell me a little about each of your choices: Creator, Spirit, Wisdom, Healer, Encompassing presence, Mystery, Friend, Liberator, Help, Emerging connection, Protector, Elemental force, Jesus, Father-Mother, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Lover, Father, Mother, Goddess, Master, Creator-Destroyer, Judge
Do you see the Earth as living? As female? Why?
How does this connect to belief (or lack thereof) in goddess?
Do you believe there was ancient goddess worship?
What were goddess-worshipping societies like? For women? For men?
Why is their existence significant for you?
Are women more spiritual than men? In what way? Why?
Do you see women's spirituality as being incompatible with Judaism and/or Christianity? If so, how? If not, why not?

PRACTICES
(for those practicing in groups):
How often do you meet?
Where do you meet?
What do you do when you get together?
Are there any leaders?
What kind of authority do leaders have?
Are there any men involved?

(when practicing alone)
Do you have an altar?
What is on your altar?
Do you do any rituals? Any kind of prayer/meditation?
How do you decide what to incorporate in your practice?
Do you think it's problematic to borrow from other cultures or religions?
How do you feel about secrecy and evangelism in regards to your spirituality?
How does your family feel about your involvement in women's spirituality?
Do you have an interest in developing your intuition?
Have you experimented with developing your psychic powers?
Do you practice magic?
    How do you practice it?
    How does it work?
    Can it be abused?
Do you believe what you believe because it works or because it's true?
Why is your identification/practice important to you?

EXPERIENCE
Did you have any spiritual experiences as a child?
Do you pay attention to your dreams? Have any been significant?
Do you claim an inner knowing?
Loss or crisis often quickens the spirit. Has this been true for you?
Have you ever had a *transformative* experience?